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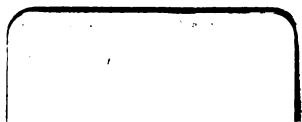
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# MY INSECT QUEEN.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR

OF

"MARGARET'S ENGAGEMENT."

"As rising on her purple wing,  
The Insect Queen of Eastern Spring  
O'er emerald meadows of Kashmeer,  
Invites the young pursuer near,  
And leads him on from flower to flower,  
A weary chase and wasted hour,—  
So Beauty lures the full-grown child."

THE GIAOUR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

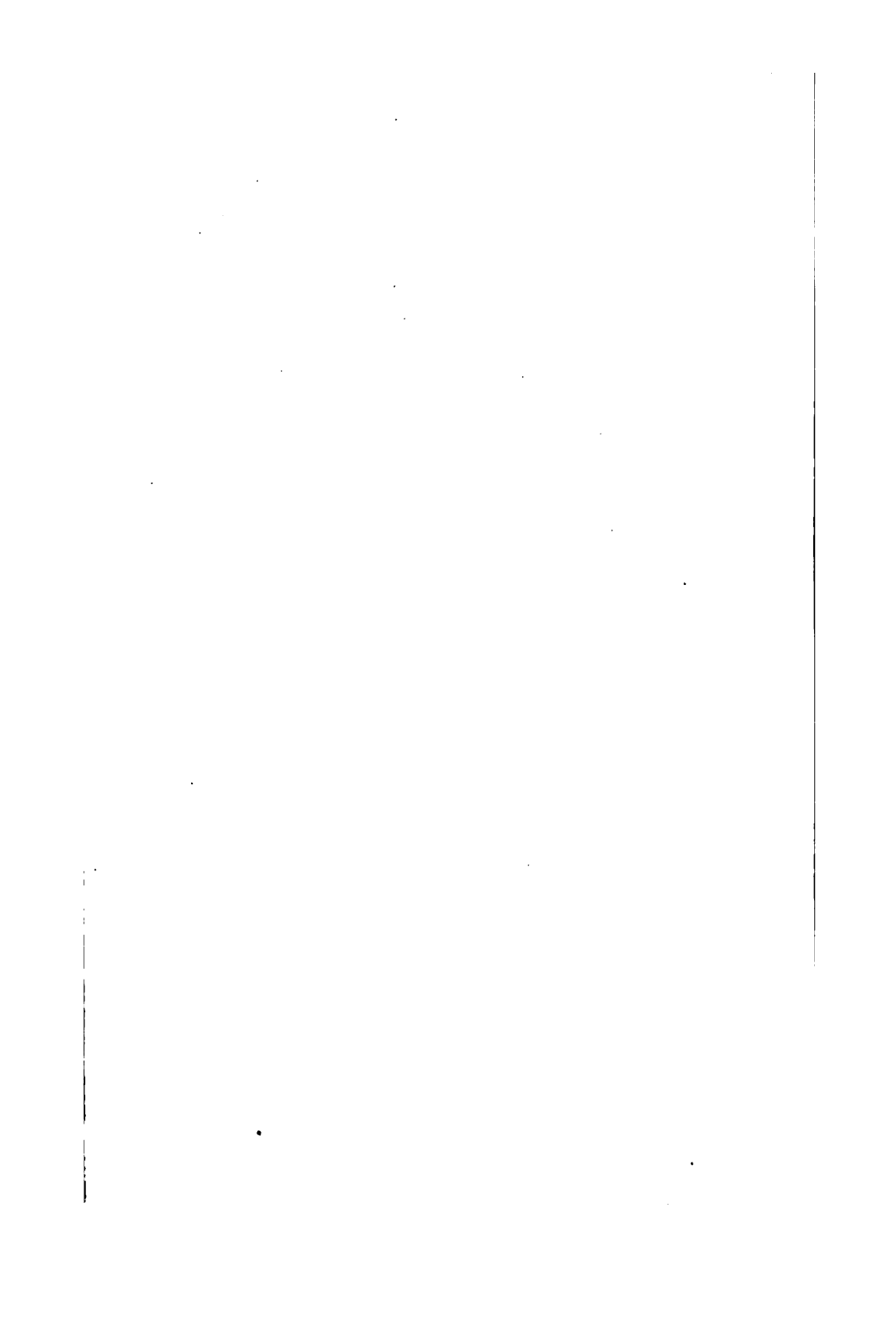
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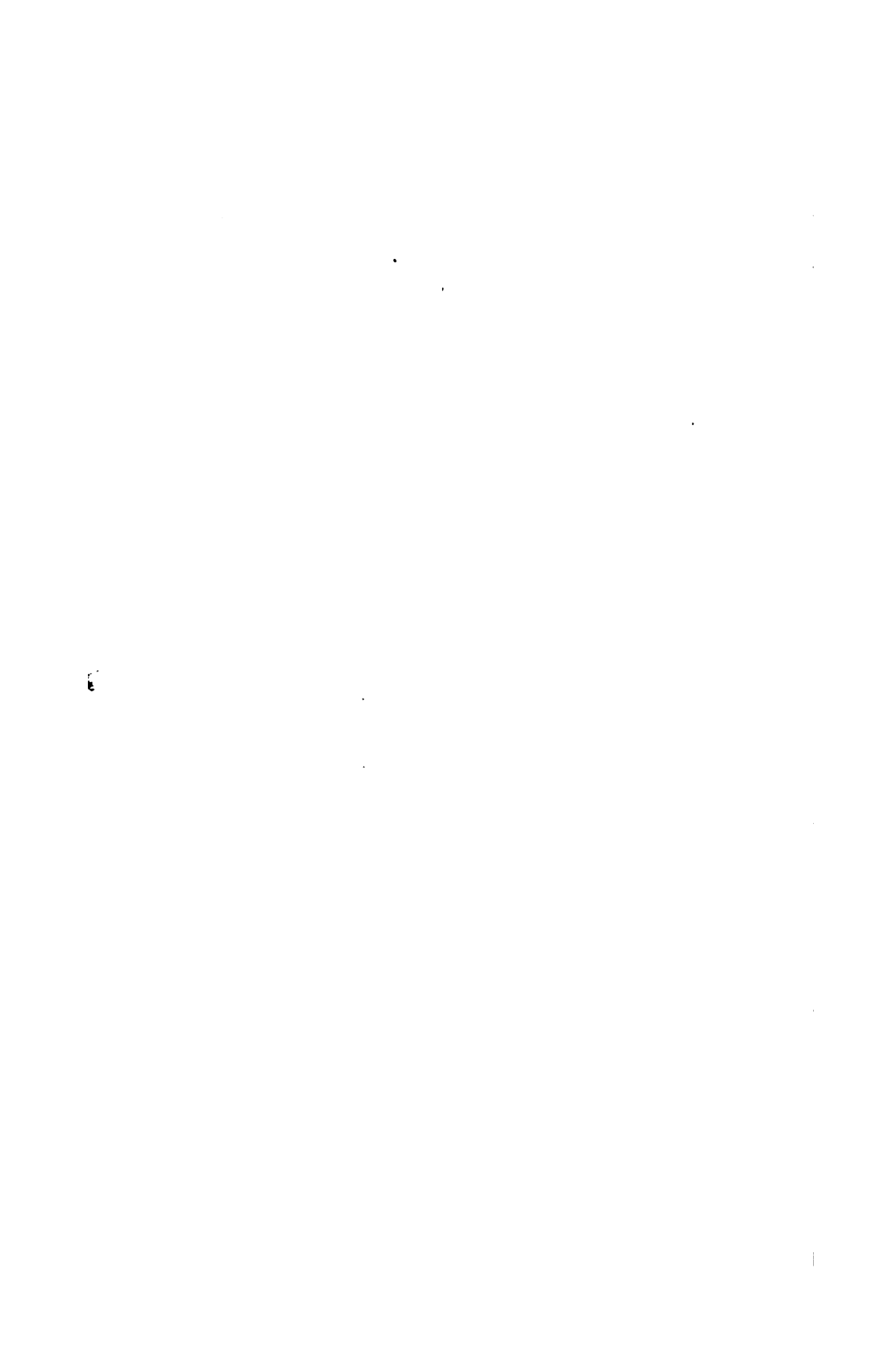


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# MY ASSISTANT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE REPORT IN CIRCULATION.

BUT he hadn't!—his well-meaning attempt in that direction had been only partially successful, had it even been an attempt at all. That will remain for ever a secret between his own conscience and his God. I might have had my suspicions, but I sought for no confirmation of them.

It seems, that when alarmed by the report, Wentworth had rushed down stairs, he found the youth lying bleeding and senseless on the floor, a discharged pistol beside him. But on lifting him to examine

his hurt, no pistol wound was discoverable ; the bullet was afterwards found lodged in my book-case. The wound from which the blood was flowing, was in the *back* of his cranium, at which only a very eccentric suicide would have taken aim, and was in fact, caused by his having fallen heavily on the iron-work of the fender. Still the hurt, though not fatal, was an ugly one, and might prove very serious to a youth whose constitution was delicate, and whose system at the time was heated and fevered.

By the time he was carried upstairs, undressed and laid in Roland's bed, having received all needful attention, the daylight had dawned, and order and quiet having been re-established, my Assistant and I sat down to consider the misfortune in all its bearings, and hold council on what was best to be done to silence the clamour of gossip and scandal with which Cleobury would not fail to resound, before noon-tide. My chief anxiety was to screen Monica from

the public reprobation that would certainly fall on her, if the cause of Frank's rash act were guessed.

But though Roland could be gentle, even tender—to the weak and suffering, he was pitilessly severe on those who erred from what he called levity of nature. He was perfectly *ogreish* on my poor little birdie. "Let all the parish, let all the county, cry shame on her," he said harshly, "so that she may learn the unwomanliness of her fault ;—is a man's life, a man's reason, to be sacrificed to a girl's heartless vanity, while her friends stand round to screen instead of punishing her?"

"But, Wentworth, she is not alone to blame in this. Sir Charles himself has made his tutor's passion for Miss Graysbrooke a subject of jest among his friends. This it is that has embittered Frank against him. The sting is less in the engagement than in its concealment."

Roland's eyes glowed. "I had not

thought Sir Charles Cotgrave a ruffian."

"You would have been strangely mistaken if you had ; a kinder-hearted, more generous fellow never breathed, but he has no faith in sentiment ; he has as much idea of a romantic attachment as he has of astrology, but he was a kind husband to Charlie's mother, and he will be equally so to Monica."

"Will he be a *faithful* husband ?" asked Roland, gloomily.

"Ah ! you are thinking of Temple's hint about Miss Gilroyd, which put you into such a passion—it was only Frank's folly. Why, Sir Charles had the *choice* of either of the girls, and he chose Monica."

"Monica chose him more likely. She is just the girl to lay herself out to win a man whom she sees is attracted by another woman, and to neglect her prey when she has secured him."

"Well, well, that is no affair of yours or

mine. I don't care to pass judgment on every heedless coquette who may cross my path, especially when she is the daughter of one friend and the promised wife of another. I shall go to Heath Hill after breakfast, and report Temple's accident to Sir Charles, and you must look after the patient, and keep Mother Pritchard within bounds, or she will spread all sorts of terrific reports from one end of the parish to the other."

But on reaching Heath Hill, I found that the "winged Fame" had already preceded me, probably in the person of the butcher's boy.

A dejected group was assembled in Lady Janet's breakfast-room. Poor warm-hearted little Charlie was sobbing piteously in Miss Gilroyd's arms. Lady Janet, pale and anxious, was listening to the sad story, as edited by the butcher's boy, which Sir Charles was repeating to her, with a horror-struck countenance, over which, as I entered, flashed a sudden ray of hope.

"Dr. Crofton here!—you have been able to leave him?—he is not dying then?—he is not *dead*?" At which hideous suggestion Charlie set up a prolonged howl.

"Dead? Sir Charles, not he! he's worth a dozen dead men yet—hold your noise, boy!—what is he bawling for?"

"Oh, poor Mr. Temple!" wailed the (forlorn) hope of Heath Hill, "he has killed himself! Mrs. Green says his poor brains are blowed all over your room!"

"Mrs. Green tells fibs—his brains are as right as ever (which is not saying much); he was very unwell last night, and stopped to sleep at my house, and he fell down in a fit, I fancy, and has injured his skull against the fender—that's all!"

"Thank heaven!" sighed Lady Janet, "what a relief!"

"A relief, to which, I fear, your ladyship is scarcely entitled, for I suspect, nay, I *know*, that Frank's seizure was in great

part owing to what passed between him and you yesterday."

The lady's face stiffened, so to speak, into a look of cold severity.

"*I am not to blame, Dr. Crofton. I did but open young Temple's eyes to the silly mystification that has been practised on him. He has only his own weakness to thank, if the revelation has been too painful.*"

"Nay, mother," said Cotgrave, good-humouredly, "I will not shirk my share of deserved censure. I have made a joke of poor Frank's passion, and not discountenanced it as I ought to have done, even had no understanding existed between the young lady and me. I am truly sorry, Dr. Crofton, that I have caused the poor fellow so much pain—he is not dangerously ill, I hope?"

"He is very seriously ill, indeed. I cannot at present say that he is not in some danger."



“Oh dear!” burst forth Charlie, with a renewed wail; “he will die! and it’s all that nasty Monica’s fault! Mrs. Green said it was—and that she was a naughty cruel girl, who had killed poor Mr. Temple.”

“Silence, Charlie!” said Lady Janet, sharply, and turning to her son-in-law, she added bitterly—“It must be highly gratifying to you to hear these comments on the conduct of your future wife, from the lips of your domestics.”

But Sir Charles’s good-humour was proof against the taunt.

“My dear mother, it would be seldom gratifying to overhear the comments of our domestics, on our relatives’ conduct or our own. It is a consolation to feel that they are scarcely competent judges of it. Look here, Crofton, here is a letter I received this very morning, from Lord Minton, promising me the secretaryship I had asked of him for poor Frank; it is in every respect

better for him, than the tutorship to a boy like Charlie. Lord Minton is going abroad in a few weeks. Such a change will be the best thing for Frank, will it not?"

And Sir Charles looked wistfully in my face, evidently hoping—and perhaps believing—that worldly advancement would sufficiently compensate Temple for the loss of his boyish hopes. If it had been Roland whom he was addressing, he would have received some reply calculated to deepen his self-reproach, and perhaps prolong his terrors, as to the consequences of his thoughtlessness. But I am made in a softer mould—I cannot kick a man when he's down.

"You could not have done a better thing for him, Sir Charles; it will be the saving of him. As soon as he is well enough, we will pack him off to Minton Park; and by the time he has seen a little of Paris and Vienna, in his Lordship's company, he may be able—and willing, who knows?—to

dance at your wedding with Miss Graysbrooke !”

“ No, no !” screamed Charlie, defiantly, “ papa shan’t marry Monica ! I won’t have her for my mamma ! I would much rather have Rosamond !”

It was well for Sir Charles that his mother-in-law could not see him, for at this unexpected avowal of preference from his little son, he suddenly coloured scarlet, and glanced hastily at Miss Gilroyd. But the young lady’s eyes did not meet his, and no faintest rose-tint deepened on the pure paleness of her cheek, as she bent down and kissed the boy’s silken curls. But she had pressed warmer kisses on the head of Mr. Wentworth’s Vixen !

As I was leaving Heath Hill, I almost ran against Major Graysbrooke, who was hurrying into the hall.

“ What’s all this about, Doctor ?” spluttered he, all excitement and eagerness. “ I have been to your house, to ask par-

ticulars, and your housekeeper told me I should find you here. Mr. Wentworth could not leave his patient to come to me."

"An unfortunate accident, Major, nothing more; our young friend has fallen, and hurt his head. I trust we shall bring him round in a few days, though he is rather in a bad way just now."

"Fallen, eh?—they told me he had blown his brains out, before your eyes. Dreadful shock that would have been for her Ladyship, eh?—a young man who has been honoured with her domestic intimacy, eh? Dear, dear!"

And the Major looked solemnly shocked at the inconsiderateness of a youth who might have startled a lady of quality by shooting himself! Clearly, the act must be criminal that could involve such a consequence!

I escaped from the old gentleman by referring him to Sir Charles, and proceeded

homewards ; but just as I reached the village, I was "collared" by the Reverend Gabriel and his bewitching bride, who thus accosted me—

"Oh, Dr. Crofton! what a dreadful thing! I shall never get over it!—the poor young man! And the poor young lady too—I can feel for her!"

"Pray, Mrs. Hartopp, do not distress yourself unnecessarily ; there is no young lady in the case ; and the young man will do well enough, for all his broken head."

"Oh, Gaby, darling! do reprove the Doctor. Such wicked stories! But you need not be so sly, Doctor—the secret is out. All Cleobury knows that Miss Graysbrooke and Mr. Temple were on the point of eloping last night, when Mr. Wentworth found it out, and told the Major ; and then Mr. Temple rushed to your house, and challenged your Assistant—and blew out his own brains instead, on your very hearth-stone."

“He must have sent them up the chimney, then, for they have not been heard of since. Mr. Hartopp, I advise you to take your wife home, and make her lie down for an hour or two. If she goes about the village listening to these wild stories, I will not answer for the consequences.”

(For Mrs. Gabriel was a supporter of that noble institution the Propagation of the British Baby, and her annual subscription would fall due in a few weeks—a fact of which she was at all times careful to apprise the uninitiated or unobservant.)

“Dr. Crofton,” answered the husband, “it is of no use. I have been imploring her not to excite herself, but she will go from house to house, listening to the most horrifying details—”

“And all of them false. Mrs. Hartopp, you must go home and keep yourself quiet. I tell you, the reports you have heard to-day are enough to *deafen* your offspring!”

And leaving her to meditate on this

peculiarly original medical theory, I took refuge in my own house at last. And there I found Annie Barham, in earnest conversation with Roland Wentworth.

"You here, Annie—and alone? Have you been here long?"

"Not five minutes. I came to offer to help Mrs. Pritchard, if you want a nurse for Frank; for I know—with all her knowledge of medical terms—she is not practically very skilful; and you have often praised me for being so, Guy."

"No occasion, Annie; she can manage very well for a day or two—with Wentworth or myself always in the way; it would not quite please Cleobury to have you domiciled with two such gay young bachelors!"

"Ah!" she said, smiling, "but I am doubly privileged, you know. I have the privilege of being an elderly woman, and of having belonged to a nursing sisterhood, besides. However, since you do not need

my poor aid, so much the better. I am glad to hear from Mr. Wentworth that the case is not so bad as we feared—that the pistol *might* have exploded accidentally, and that Frank did not really meditate a crime.”

“If he did, he is spared to repent it; and there is no fear of his repeating it. A man rarely attempts his own life twice. Have you been driving Miss Gilroyd about lately? She looks as if a little more change would do her no harm.”

Here Roland, who had been on the point of leaving the room, paused, and turned back to arrange, or disarrange, some papers on a side-table. Miss Barham answered—

“I can seldom persuade her to come with me; she was a little hurt, I think, at Lady Janet’s seeming to warn me against over-indulging her—she is so sensitive.”

“Is Lady Janet kind to her companion?” asked Wentworth, abruptly; “is she—is Miss Gilroyd happy with her?”



"It is not a position in which a sensitive, high-spirited girl, can be very happy," replied Annie. "Lady Janet is not unkind to her, but she is severe in exacting a duty, and makes no allowance for the difficulty of some duties to certain natures. She will not soften those difficulties, nor aid the effort which it must cost to surmount them."

"And she is right," said Roland; "the moral muscle, like the physical one, is braced by effort, and relaxed by disuse."

"True, Mr. Wentworth; but that truth must be received with a qualification—we must not be too severe. Who but the One Great Physician can rightly measure the *degree* of effort that may be salutary, or even possible, to any soul?—we may think ourselves just, when we are only cruel."

"It is not cruel," answered Roland, "to demand a strength in others that we have proved in ourselves."

“Nay ; would you expect from a child an endurance of physical pain that might be easy to a strong man ? Some souls are weak in the infancy of spiritual growth, that may yet attain to the vigour of perfected maturity.”

“Perfect through suffering,” repeated Wentworth, “let them rise as we have risen—let them grow as we have grown ; why should we decline for them the discipline we accept for ourselves ? Miss Barham, our faith is but half-hearted, and therefore powerless ; in our schools, on our platforms, in our pulpits, we appeal to the lowest motives of our hearers—we talk *down* to their ignorance and weakness, instead of raising them with us to the heights to which we at least aspire ; and our teaching is unfruitful, because the most selfish and ignorant of our hearers is yet dimly conscious that, amid all the discord within him, the key-note to the truest harmony is unstruck—our trumpet gives an uncertain

blast, that sounds rather for flight than for conquest."

He quitted the room, and Annie looked after him thoughtfully.

"He is young," she said, "and I fear, unhappy. The green fruit wants sweetness—the unopened bud lacks fragrance—but they ripen in the sunshine, not in the storm. He is too hard."

"But Miss Gilroyd, Annie?" (for I was much more interested in the young lady than in the gentleman), "do you think Lady Janet keeps her too closely in attendance upon her?"

"Not that exactly; Lady Janet is not selfish, and I am sure she would refuse Rosamond no recreation that she thought good for her—but you know her pride of birth and position—the services she exacts from Miss Gilroyd are not menial, they are such as would be willingly and cheerfully yielded by a loving heart, but the yoke galls a neck which is unused to servitude ;

she will not allow for the over-sensitiveness of a girl who was but lately a flattered and courted heiress, admired and sought after. She says she was then in a false position, and that she must learn to face the realities of that which more properly belongs to her."

"She is an arrogant old cat! by the way, Annie, did Wentworth tell you that he had known Miss Gilroyd formerly, before misfortune befell them both?"

"No; did he? Rosamond never names him to me."

"They neither of them seem anxious to renew the acquaintance, or even to speak of it."

Annie fell a-musing.

"There is a little secret somewhere, Guy, can you guess it?"

"Not yet, unless it be only that the ruin that fell on Roland's family through Gilroyd's bankruptcy, makes any recurrence to the past painful to them both; if there

is any other secret I'll ferret it out before long."

"Never doubt you, Doctor!" laughed Miss Barham, "and when you have found it, I will cry shares!"

"No, no, Annie, if you can charge me with industry in surprising my friend's secrets—at least you will give me credit for discretion in keeping them?"

"Pretty well for that; good-bye," and she glided from the house. As I watched her depart I sighed to think how seldom a woman becomes thoroughly trustworthy and companionable to a middle-aged man, until her youthful charms have faded. If only Annie Barham could be what she *was* to look at,—and what she *is*, to love!

.

## CHAPTER II.

### A STOLEN VISIT.

“KIND enquiries” poured thick upon us all that afternoon, but curiosity, I suspect, had the greatest share in the interest expressed by Cleobury in Mr. Temple’s “accident.” Nor was the public appetite much impaired by anxiety, for at the usual dinner-hour the enquiries ceased, and having looked out of the window and ascertained that it was raining fast, I drew my chair to the fire, with my evening paper beside me, and arranged myself for a cosy evening. The patient upstairs was doing well, he was fast asleep. I had been with him all the afternoon, and Roland, who had been out,

had now returned, and was writing at the further end of the table, when the muffled street bell gave a faint tinkle, and Mrs. Pritchard's voice—muffled like the bell—was heard “colloguing” with some one in the lobby. Then a light tap at the door, and in glided—cloaked, shrouded, and veiled—the little figure of Monica Graysbrooke. I sprang up to meet her as she came silently towards me, placed both her hands in mine, and lifted her large blue eyes, from which the tears were dropping slowly.

“My dear girl!” I cried, “my dear, impulsive, imprudent child! what brings you here at such an hour, and alone?”

“I am not alone,” she faltered, “but oh, dear Dr. Guy, do tell me the truth—the real truth—is Frank—?”

And off she went into a fit of sobs and child-like weeping—what could I do but try to soothe her?

“Don't fret, dear child, Frank is safe; he is in no danger, he will be all right in a

day or two. There, there, dry your eyes, and let me see your pretty smile again; why did you not send, Monica, instead of coming? this is such an imprudence—you will be the talk of the place—and how annoyed they will be at Heath Hill.”

“ They shall know nothing about it, Dr. Crofton, don’t scold me; I have been so unhappy, so frightened at the dreadful things I heard, and I thought the worst was perhaps hid from me. Papa and I were to dine at Heath Hill, but at the last moment I sent him with an excuse, and then I took my maid and slipped out here. She is gone into the kitchen with Mrs. Pritchard. No one was out in the rain to see me. Look, my hood is quite wet; I will dry it by your fire.”

And the little heedless thing took off her cloak and hood, and threw them over a chair before the fire. Then she turned to Roland, who had risen at her entrance, and now came forward.



"Mr. Wentworth, is Temple really in no danger? Dr. Crofton is so kind, he would not tell me the truth if he thought it would hurt me much; but you would not mind that."

Roland hesitated and looked as if he would like to *pinch* her a little, by telling her that Temple was on the point of death, but he answered coldly—

"Mr. Temple is in no immediate danger, Miss Graysbrooke."

"Then you will let me see him, won't you? just for a minute? I am sure a few kind words from me would do him so much good."

"He has heard too many of your kind words, Miss Graysbrooke, they have nearly killed him—body and soul, perhaps."

"You are very unjust, Mr. Wentworth; Frank's illness is no fault of mine, it was Lady Janet's fault, for being so harsh and abrupt to him; if I had been allowed to have my own way, he would not have been

vexed and hurt. He would have left Heath Hill quietly, and all would have ended well."

"I am not your judge, Miss Graysbrooke!" replied Roland, looking, however, as if he thought he ought to be, "but allow me to point out to you that you could not have done anything more calculated to injure Temple, than coming here to-night. His room is over this, and if he should hear your voice, the excitement it would throw him into would be highly dangerous."

"As if he could hear my small voice, all the way up-stairs! oh, good gracious! is that him knocking?"

Wentworth obeyed the summons, without reply, and my poor little terrified visitor looked anxiously at me.

"Is it true, Dr. Crofton? will my being here hurt Frank?"

"I daresay it would hurt him if he could hear you, but he cannot. The floor is too thick, and his bed is just over that great

beam, but you must speak very low, Monica, and you ought to go away at once!"

But I did not say that with much decision, for I did like to see her there. A stray sunbeam she was, just glancing on my hearth, soon to flit away to rest upon another man's. But she brightened it as she stood there, so round, and fresh, and rosy (qualities, by the bye, which are rarely attributed, even in metaphor, to sunbeams). How could I have borne the dulness of my home before she came there, how could I bear it when she should be gone?

Childish and volatile, she had already forgotten her brief sorrow and sympathy for Frank, and was smiling, amused and playful, at the novelty of finding herself alone with me, by my bachelor fireside. She turned her cloak round before the fire, to dry it, and stood on tiptoe before the glass, to arrange her curls, and smooth the collar round her white throat.

"Doctor," she said, making a little

grimace at herself, "that is a very unbecoming glass. I look quite a fright in it, —is it not funny to be here all alone with you, while that sour Lady Janet, and that tiresome Sir Charles, and my poor old innocent Pups, all believe I am crying my eyes out in my bed? You won't tell of me, dear Doctor, will you?"

"It will serve you right if I do, miss, only then you may, perhaps, lose your lover, and your chance of being Lady of Heath Hill."

"I don't want to be Lady of Heath Hill," (how strange that she persists in asserting that!) "Lady Janet is mistress there, and a much fitter one than poor silly me. See, Doctor, don't I look more at home in a cosy little parlour like this, than in that great sprawling drawing-room at Heath Hill, with that eternal mother-in-law, and that spoiled brat, Charlie? are we not snug, now, you and I?"

Lord help me! as she stood before me,

archly smiling, with her plump white hands clasped on either side of her trim waist, twirling round before the glass to admire herself, just as a brilliant butterfly turns about on a flower, and flaps its painted wings in the sunlight—as I looked at her so, I *did* wish that Sir Charles had been in the Red Sea, ere he had taken a prize which he seemed to value so little now he had got it.

How proud I should have been, in my pretty home at Rosebank, with a gay little wife sparkling among its blossoms—leaving to Roland this musty old den, and the practice, and the night-bell, and—yes, hang it, he might have old mother Pritchard into the bargain! But here he comes stumping down stairs again; and as he came in, Monica's smile faded, her dimples fled, her hands dropped folded beside her, and she looked as demure as a pussy cat that has lost its mouse!

Would *I* be a young man of twenty-

seven, to scare away the laughter from the lips of a pretty girl ?

“Is he better, Mr. Wentworth ?” she enquired, with an earnest pitifulness in her innocent face that became it even more than the dimples.

“He is doing very well,” answered Roland, “I left him asleep.” Then turning to me, he said, “I think it may not prove very serious, after all.”

“Oh, I am so glad !” and resuming her childish gaiety, she sat down on the hearth rug, almost at Roland’s feet, and clasped her arms round the neck of the dog that was lying there. Happy dog ! to have such a double wealth of sweet caresses lavished upon it !

“Mr. Wentworth,” said Monica, softly, “you were very cross to me just now ; you think I have wronged your friend, but I am not very wise—I never was—was I, Dr. Guy ? and I am not very old yet. I have not outgrown my nursery fondness for

loving looks and words ; and everybody gives them to me—Frank Temple, like the rest. I did not know I was so *very* wicked in taking pleasure in his friendship, as in every one's who is kind to me. Love—*all* love—is so beautiful and sweet, I am greedy of love !”

If she had said that to me, I think I *must* have kissed her ! But nothing seemed further from Roland Wentworth's thoughts.

“Yes,” he answered, gravely, “Love is beautiful, and therefore it should be kept ever holy and sacred, and not profaned to the gratification of a selfish and frivolous vanity.”

The prig ! I could have kicked him ! The bright colour rushed over Monica's face and neck, and she bent down over the dog, to hide it, then glanced up a look of reproach at her reprover, and said quite bitterly for *her*—

“You are very severe, Mr. Wentworth ; I do not envy the woman who may love

*you*—you are far too ungentle to be trusted with so delicate a thing as a loving woman's heart."

Her words seemed to sting him. Oh, trust any woman for knowing how to strike an enemy home! He fixed his dark eyes on her a moment, steadily, and seemed about to make a stern reply; but perhaps he was struck by the infantine grace of her attitude, or touched by the soft pathos that lingered in her voice, for he answered gently—

"It may be so, Miss Graysbrooke, but though *I* be unworthy, as you say, to win a woman's love, *you* have won, and hold in plighted troth, the heart of an honourable man—keep it faithfully, lest you, too, be reproached with unworthiness of the trust."

She tossed her pretty head, disdainfully. "Lightly won, lightly lost!" she said, "a few idle hours, a few playful words, a half-jesting question, a wholly jesting assent, and so the bond is knit that you gentlemen



think is strong enough to bind a girl for life! You look shocked, Mr. Wentworth, but remember, I am only eighteen—I am but just free from a school-girl's bondage; I must have a little time to enjoy my liberty—it is cruel in my friends to treat me like a poor little bird with a string to its foot, pulling it back whenever it would feel its wings."

"Miss Graysbrooke," he answered quietly, "I think you had better go home."

"I shan't!" she flashed forth, indignantly, "it is not your house, it is Dr. Crofton's, and he will not order me out of it;" but instantly changing her manner, she sprang to her feet, "you are right, forgive my petulance, I will go;" and she allowed him to ring the bell for her maid, and me to put on her cloak and furs. I would have escorted her home, but she declined my protection. "Catherine and I can slip home in two minutes, Dr. Crofton, thanks, good-night; good-night, Mr. Wentworth," she

added, submissively, "and be more indulgent to me—I have been sadly spoiled, I know, but I am not so naughty as I seem," and she timidly gave him her hand, with a look of winning entreaty that would have melted a Polar Bear.

Did it melt Roland? If it did, he did not tell *me* so.

## CHAPTER III.

### A SLACKENED CHAIN.

ROLAND'S opinion proved correct. Frank Temple's hurt was not so serious as we had feared, and his recovery was speedy. He persisted in declaring that the discharge of the pistol was accidental. He explained it by saying that he had been firing at a target, when Lady Janet sent for him, to make the unpleasant communication that he had been fooled by Monica and Sir Charles. In the excitement of the moment he had rushed to my house, forgetting the loaded pistol in his pocket, and had only remembered it when taking off his coat to go to bed. He was holding it in his hand,

when a sudden faintness came over him, and he recollected no more, but supposed that in his fall the weapon had exploded.

Of course there were many in Cleobury who declined to accept this version of the story, and persisted in asserting that young Temple had attempted suicide in despair at having been jilted by Monica, but the young lady's friends were too influential in our little circle to permit of the slander being circulated, except in nods and whispers, to which she, with her customary lightness, gave no heed.

The young gentleman's passion proved as brief as it been violent, and evaporated in the stillness of a darkened chamber beneath the sedative influences of medical treatment and the solemn preachings of Miss Barham and my Assistant. He became thoroughly ashamed of himself, and anxious to get away from the scene of his folly. He departed quietly to his new situation at

Minton Park, without any leave-takings, and without again seeing Miss Graysbrooke. And in one short week our little world forgot all about him, and never heard, nor cared to hear, of him again.

There arose, however, a second tempest in our tea-pot, owing to Monica's contumacious behaviour in the matter of her engagement to Sir Charles, which Lady Janet and the Major had persistently proclaimed to the whole circle of their acquaintance, and which she had as persistently denied. There had resulted an angry scene between the young rebel and her elders, which after a warm discussion had ended in a compromise.

Miss Monica declared herself to be free from any claim on her lover's part, to her fidelity or general good behaviour, and gave him back his freedom likewise; but she bound herself to accept no other proposal for the term of twelve months, at the end of which period of probation he might come forward

again, and the affair was then to be settled on a permanent basis.

Lady Janet expressed herself highly dissatisfied with this arrangement.

"It looks to me," she said, "as if you just wished to keep Charles waiting for you, until you could make up your mind whether you were likely to get a better offer or not. Very well for you, but scarcely fair to him."

"You must judge my little girl more leniently, Lady Janet," pleaded the old Major; "perhaps she wishes to make herself more worthy of your son-in-law's attachment."

"No, I don't," cried Monica, irreverently. "I only *think* I am too young to marry, and I don't want to be bored with the same man everlastingly at my heels, in the character of a *fiancé*. If I marry him at all, it shall be out-and-out, and have done with it!"

"Monica!" remonstrated her horror-struck parent.

“Miss Graysbrooke,” said her ladyship, with dignity, “you have a most unladylike way of expressing yourself—but at least you avow a preference for my son-in-law?”

“A preference over whom?” answered the incorrigible damsel. “There’s nobody to prefer him to, that I know of,—well, no, I like Dr. Guy much better—I’d as soon marry one as the other.”

Lady Janet was disgusted, but the Baronet interposed, with his usual good-nature. “My dear mother, we will not be hard upon Monica; she shall have her liberty for the time she asks, and I pledge myself to renew my suit at the expiration of it. I am not afraid that she will make a wrong use of her freedom, nor will I be so ungenerous as to hold her to a promise she wishes to withdraw.”

And Monica thanked him with such winning tones, with such honey-sweet smiles and glances, that, egad, I thought her re-

fusal, or rather her *postponement* of him was more caressing and flattering than her acceptance could have been; and, although Major Graysbrooke frowned, and Lady Janet snarled; when the high contracting parties themselves were satisfied, what could anyone else find to say?

And so it was settled—the settlement, so far as I could make out, amounting to this—that for twelve months neither of them was bound to marry the other, and neither of them would marry any one else.

“The only advantage I can see in the arrangement,” said the old lady, “is, that either of them is free to flirt with any one else who happens to be near. No fear that Miss Graysbrooke will neglect the privilege,—but Charles was never given to that kind of thing, and since the young ladies of the county have hitherto failed to attract him, Monica is in no danger from *his* inconstancy!”



Was she not? *I* was not quite so sure of that. I had not forgotten Sir Charles's manner when he first announced his engagement to me ; it did not then indicate much exultation—and he seemed to take his dismissal pretty much in the light of a reprieve. He was ever courteous and attentive to his refractory lady-love, but her perverseness seemed rather to amuse than to annoy him, and when, in her petulant, peremptory way, she would banish him from her side, and turn to chat with me, or to smile on Roland, he would march off, quite indifferent, and set himself to entertain Miss Gilroyd.

One evening, there was a quiet little party assembled at Heath Hill, when, late in the evening, I strolled in, after my day's work, to join them. For once, Roland had preceded me by an hour or two. He was a special favourite with little Charlie, and as a natural consequence, Lady Janet was always inviting him to Heath

Hill, but he rarely went there, and when he did, he devoted himself entirely to the old lady and her grandson, seldom looking at Miss Gilroyd, still seldomer addressing her, although by some mysterious instinct he seemed always to see her every gesture and hear her every word. But then those reticent people are so observant, their organs seemed gifted with double faculties; they can hear with their eyes, and see with their ears! When I went into the drawing-room, I found Rosamond and Monica playing a duet that was literally "stunning," while Sir Charles leant over the fair pianists, with such impartiality of devotion, that hang it, if *I* could have told to which of them he was most attentive, although, I daresay, to the lady chiefly interested in his attentions, there was no ambiguity in them at all.

At the other end of the room, Lady Janet was winding a skein of wool, that Annie Barham was holding for her, while

Roland sat near them, turning over a portfolio of engravings. Little Charlie knelt on the hearthrug at his feet—making a *new tail* for Silver, a favourite recreation of Charles's, who thus utilised his misfortune. Every day the spaniel was adorned with an original invention, which served the double purpose of employing her little master, and displaying his resources in decorative art. Sometimes it was an appendage of gaily-streaming ribbons, sometimes artificial flowers, or a fox's brush. Once it was a plume of marabout feathers, that gave the animal, at a little distance, the look of an *abnormal* ostrich. In short, Silver's terminal developments were as eccentric, and more variable, than any mermaid's. To-morrow, I suppose, it was to be the tail ornithological, as Master Charles was engaged in fastening together some long plumes from a peacock's train, with a large gilt buckle that he had begged from his grandmother's maid. The performance

kept him quiet, and that was a blessing, anyhow.

Old Major Graysbrooke, ensconced in an easy chair by the fire, was wrapt in profound slumber, from which he would occasionally be aroused by his own mellifluous snort, look guiltily round, and perceiving himself undetected, return to the land of Nod. I joined the group quietly, under cover of the overture *à quatre mains*, and stood beside her ladyship before Annie had made her aware of my approach. She was saying, in her usual decisive manner—

“Relaxation? Annie Barham, we have too much of that—it is tension we require, rather. Ah, Dr. Guy!—here is Miss Barham accusing me of being too strict a disciplinarian — of thinking too much of youth’s *duties*, and too little of its *claims*.”

“Have you been having another battle with Miss Monica?”

Here the Major woke up with a start.

“ Eh ?—what ?—Monica ?—to be sure—  
ah !”

And off he went again, after gazing glassily round him.

“ No such thing, Major,” responded the blind lady, unaware of the sleeper’s condition ; “ I have had no battle with anybody. We were not speaking of Monica, Dr. Crofton, but of Miss Gilroyd. Annie thinks her duties are too severe for her. I urge that she undertook them voluntarily, and makes no complaint ; and it is false kindness to young persons in her rank of life to let them think that life is to be passed in pleasure. The reality must be fronted one day ; it is well that the mind’s energies should be braced by constant exercise, to be ready to meet the strain.”

As she spoke, the duet came to a close, with a final rattle and thump, that might have “ shivered the timbers” of any piano that was not used to it ! Rosamond rose from the music-stool, but Monica remained

seated, and stooped to take some music from the stand, throwing one arm round her friend's waist to support herself as she did so.

"At present," I observed, "Miss Gilroyd's duties are certainly not severe."

(And I secretly wished *I* had them !)

"But, Dr. Crofton, Miss Barham says she looks ill—*does* she look ill, do you think ?"

I looked attentively at the girl, on whose face, turned towards me, the light from the lamp over the piano was falling. She had certainly altered in the short time she had been at Heath Hill. Her large dark eyes looked larger and darker, from the hollows beneath them. The flush on her cheek was such as often follows, or heralds, a deeper paleness ; and in her whole figure and attitude there was listlessness and languor. I hesitated in replying to Lady Janet's question, and she said, fretfully—

"I am sure you think with Annie, that

I am wearing the girl out with my selfish tyranny. Mr. Wentworth, let me have *your* opinion of Miss Gilroyd's looks."

Roland seemed not to hear her. His eyes, like mine, had turned on Rosamond's face, and rested there; and Charlie took advantage of his abstraction to stick a tall peacock's feather behind his head. Receiving no reply, Lady Janet thought he had moved out of hearing, and turned to me again—

"We will speak further on this subject, Dr. Crofton, if you will give me a few moments when our friends have left us to-night. Mr. Wentworth!—call him, somebody; tell him to ask Miss Gilroyd to sing that little barcarole that Charlie is so fond of."

Roland went to the piano to give the order, and Monica quitted her seat, and placed herself on a sofa in a distant corner, where she made a sign of invitation to me to join her, which I very readily obeyed.

Since the night of her stolen visit to Frank Temple, I had seen her but seldom, and never alone ; and I felt it was better so. I could not long have withstood the seduction of the little witch's soft looks and words. True, a mere country surgeon could not have been considered a fit match for the Major's pretty daughter—an heiress, too ; but the fortune I had just inherited raised me far above the position I once held, of a man who has his bread to work for. Many a mother who would once have called her chickens under her wing if I approached them at a pic-nic, or in a ball-room, would now turn her head another way if I lingered in surrendering my fair charge to her chaperone. Nor did I think that Monica would be hard to win. Temple had failed ; but then Temple was a silly, sentimental youth, who made himself—and what was more unpardonable, would have made her—ridiculous. And Sir Charles had failed ; but then he had no tact. He



was cold, too—as much too cold as the other was too warm ; and, after all, who can account for a girl's capricious fancy ? She did not care for these young fellows, and she *did* seem to care for *me* ! But honour raised a barrier between us—while Sir Charles is still on the list of aspirants for her hand, that list is closed, Guy Crofton, to *you*—but, should he finally fail, and Rosebank be still without its queen, why then — *qui vivra verra*. Meantime, was I to be blamed for yielding—just a little—to the soft spell of the enchantress ? In Monica's manner to me, the ease and confidence of a child was blended with a timid, womanly consciousness of a man's—I will not say a *lover's*—admiration—a kind of bashful audacity, if I may call it so, that was piquant—that was irresistible—bewildering. “Bewildering,” I may well say, for never, when she had flitted from my side, could I recall one word that had fallen from those rosy lips in answer to the

tender avowals that trembled on mine—one word that might not have been spoken at the Market Cross. Yet ever, when she was near me, I was drawn on by the sweet significance of voice, or smile, or blush—(those blushes of Monica's, which seemed to come at will)—to cherish wild hopes that, when she left me, melted into air, like the rainbow hues in the bubbles that a child's breath can form or dissipate.

As I went up to her, she made room for me to sit beside her, and said, in that soft, cooing murmur, that could not reach the ears of the party at the other end of the room, "Now, Dr. Guy, are we not a happy group here, to-night? After all the battles we have had, is it not charming to see such peace?"

"You have fought for your liberty, Monica, and you have won it now, I hear?"

"Yes, I have my freedom now; and what shall I do with it?" and she assumed a deliberative air, and shot a sly sidelong

glance at me, as if she knew well the suggestion I would have offered, had I dared.

"You will do as all girls do; you will give it away, or give it back, ere long."

She glanced over at Sir Charles, who was conversing with Miss Gilroyd, and taking no notice of us.

"Do you not think," she asked, "that *he* is as glad to give me back my pledge, as I am to receive it?"

"Are you piqued, Monica, that he should have surrendered it so readily?"

"I am not piqued; but I think he might have made some faint show of reluctance; just for gallantry's sake, you know. Perhaps, he thinks with you, that I shall soon recall him? It would be a good lesson to teach him, that *others* can win hearts as easily as *he* can, and hold them much faster!"

"Ah, cruel child! Why were you so easily won?"

"Why, indeed! It was mere playful-

ness. I never thought seriously of such a tie. My friends thought more of it than Sir Charles himself did, or could he have resigned it so easily? Dr. Crofton, if my promise had been given to *you*, would you have absolved me from it without a struggle, as *he* did?"

Her blue eyes dwelt so earnestly on mine I could not choose but gaze into their pure depths as stedfastly, as I answered, impressively. "Had your promise been given to *me*, Monica, I would have surrendered it only with my life. You should have had both, if that would have made you happy."

(I wonder if she believed that?—*I* didn't!)

Her eyelashes fell on her blooming cheek, and the hand that lay on her lap, moved a little nearer mine. I imprisoned the soft white bird—and it did not struggle from my clasp.

"Mona," I whispered, "now I have lost

my patient, no light foot will steal over my threshold to ask news of him, no sweet face will smile in upon my dreary old den,—only the cold moonlight of memory is left, where sunshine once brightened a Paradise !”

(I did not in the least know what I meant, nor if there was any meaning at all in my words. I am inclined, on reviewing them, to think that there was none ; but they answered their purpose perfectly, and the wisdom of Solomon could have done no more !)

“I will come again, Dr. Guy, since it pleases you,” she said, sweetly, “of course I cannot come alone, but I will come with papa ; only, I am so afraid of Mr. Wentworth. He is so severe—and I know he despises me.”

“Mr. Wentworth be—I beg your pardon, Monica. Never mind him, he is never at home, except at certain hours.”

“What hours, Dr. Guy ? tell me when

he is likely to be at home, that I may not come *then*."

"Oh, he is generally in the surgery from ten to twelve, and sometimes from four to five; but at other times he is seldom at home before eight o'clock. And so you do not like Wentworth, Monica?"

"How can I like him? he is so cross; so unlike you—who are always kind and indulgent."

I acknowledged these tender words with a pressure of the little hand that still rested in mine; and I fancied the caress was returned.

"But he is such a handsome fellow, Monica, and you ladies think so much of that."

"Is he?" she answered, carelessly, and stooped down to pick up a flower that had fallen from her girdle.

My arm had been resting on the back of the sofa. Now it slid down, somehow, and as she leaned back again, it touched her

waist. She did not shrink from the touch, and I was encouraged to wind it just a little closer. It was horribly wrong, and swift retribution followed. An elvish screech sounded in my ear, from that detestable Charlie, who had stolen behind us unperceived.

"I say ! grandma ! here's Dr. Guy has got his arm round Monica's waist, and he is squeezing her tight !"

As the women say, "you might have knocked me down with a feather," I could have knocked the brat down with a birch-broom. But Miss Graysbrooke was as cool as a Naiad.

"Oh, you little calumniator !" she cried ; "I'll kill you !" and she started up, and made a rush at him with a sofa pillow, and chased him merrily round the room, till he flung himself panting, and screaming with glee, into Roland Wentworth's arms. I thought I saw a sly smile on my Assistant's lips, when Charlie made the indiscreet re-

velation, but he bent down his head to hide it, and although everybody laughed at Miss Graysbrooke's pursuit of the criminal, no one seemed to suspect that I had been justly accused. Still I felt a vindictive satisfaction when the nurse came in, and bore away Master Cotgrave to his dewy slumbers.



## CHAPTER IV.

### LADY JANET ASTONISHES ME.

"Make thy house ready to receive a bride,  
For she is found, thy hearth shall not be lonely."

LORD LYTTON.

THE visitors walked off together in a body. Major Graysbrooke offered his arm to Miss Barham, Roland walked beside Monica, and off they went. The night was fair, the distance to Cleobury under two miles, and as the Major kept no carriage, the walk was a usual one with him. Annie's little pony-chaise had brought him, and if the weather had been bad, it would have come for him and Miss Graysbrooke, but as it was otherwise, the ladies preferred the

walk, under the gentlemen's escort. As I bade them good-night at the hall-door, Sir Charles said—

“You have a private audience upstairs with my mother, have you not, Doctor? will you join me in the smoking-room when she has done with you?”

“Not to-night, Sir Charles, I should be barred out, it is getting late. I have lost my latch-key, and should have to ring up Roland. I'll say good-night now, and just run up to Lady Janet for a moment.”

“Well, good-night, old fellow—stop—I say, Crofton, if you prescribe for Miss Gilroyd, don't give her anything to spoil her pretty teeth.”

“It would make very little difference since she so seldom shews them.”

“Does she not? why I thought if she smiled on no one else she would smile on you.”

He turned away laughing. What did he mean I wondered, as I went up to the

old lady. She was sitting silent where I had left her ; Miss Gilroyd, also silent, was bending over a book. I drew a chair beside her and took her hand,—to feel her pulse, you understand.

“And now for my fair patient, Lady Janet, what does she complain of?”

She drew her hand away, (I wonder has the young lady “got a temper,”) saying coldly—

“I have no claim to be your patient, Dr. Crofton, for I complain of nothing!”

“Which is no proof that you ail nothing,” said her Ladyship, “you are thin, they tell me ; you are pale, and Mr. Wentworth says you are greatly altered.”

The girl made an impatient movement, and her cheek crimsoned.

“Mr. Wentworth?” she repeated, “you do not wish me to consult two doctors, do you, Lady Janet? if I must choose, I would prefer Dr. Crofton, but I need no medical advice from either.”

"You are disobedient, Miss Gilroyd," said the elder lady severely.

"Not so, madam, you do not, I hope, find me remiss in any of the duties you *hired* me" (with a bitter emphasis) "to fulfil. It was, I think, no part of our contract that I should submit myself to the scrutiny of your advisers, whether medical or clerical."

"How can you continue to fulfil your duties if you neglect your health? or if it is the too rigid exaction of them that has injured it, is it not become my duty to care for it?"

"I am perfectly well."

"And happy?"

A pause, then she said, very low—

"My happiness, I think, was never understood to be your Ladyship's charge."

"There it is!" cried her mistress, excitedly, "she admits it! she is unhappy—she is pining away—for what? What do you complain of, Miss Gilroyd, what do you wish for? is your salary insufficient?"

"Certainly not, madam, you are quite sufficiently liberal in that respect."

"Do I exact too much of your time? does it fatigue you to spend so many hours in amusing a blind old woman?"

"Scarcely, since I was engaged for that."

"Is your room comfortable? are the servants respectful? is my son-in-law kind to you?"

"Yes, madam; to all these questions *yes*."

"Then what *do* you complain of, in the name of goodness? really, the girls of the present day are insatiable in their demands—here you are pining and fretting, in a situation where you are well paid, well cared for—where your duties are light—a situation for which you were selected from—yes, Dr. Guy, she was chosen from *forty-eight* applicants."

"I make no complaint," said Rosamond, "I never have made any; you are displeased with me for not looking well, but I reply, I am quite well; you ask me, am I

happy ? I answer, do food, and shelter, and clothing, suffice for happiness ?”

“Perhaps not,” replied Lady Janet, “but they go a great way towards it ; you have at least leisure to be happy when you have no anxiety about these. Miss Gilroyd, I think it is your duty to be happy.”

Rosamond kept silence.

“You wish for change, possibly ; would you like to leave Cleobury ?”

“No ! oh, no !” (very eagerly).

“I believe the fact is, that like too many young persons of your class, you are discontented with your dependent position and aspire to rise above it. Let me advise you to check this fretful peevish temper, and to exert yourself to be cheerful and content. In your beauty—they tell me you have beauty—your intelligence, your accomplishments—you may at least find a rational enjoyment, which is all that most of us can look forward to as happiness.”

“All very well for *you*,” thought I, as I

glanced from the faded old crone of sixty-five to the beautiful girl beside her, "the brooding fog on the low lying lands is all that your failing eyes are now fit to rest on—from the level you have reached, you can be content with these—but youth has a far wider horizon, and a vision of clearer range."

Rosamond's excitement had passed off, and she made answer calmly—

"I aspire to no position to which I have *lost* my claim, Lady Janet, but you should make some allowance for my restlessness in a sphere which is yet new to me; I may *submit* to dependence, I cannot be happy in it. I have not yet forgotten that my accomplishments were once the charm of a circle of loving friends, and not priced in the labour market by those who are as little interested in their possessor, as if she were, indeed, a slave."

And, bowing slightly to me, this refractory patient quitted the room.

"Is she gone?" asked the old lady. "Dr. Crofton, did you ever see such a haughty girl? She might be the daughter of a line of kings, and her father, after all, was only a banker—very wealthy at one time, I daresay, but those sort of people ought to be prepared for reverses. If they are raised by their money to a seeming equality with people of rank, when they lose it they only fall back to their true level. Ah, you, of course, take quite a different view; you belong to their class, and judge from their point of view. But still she is a good girl, very clever, and very useful to me, and Charlie adores her."

"Charlie?" I echoed; "do you mean Sir Charles?"

"I mean my grandchild, of course; what are you thinking of, Doctor?"

What, indeed! I felt abashed and confused at my indiscretion, and glad for once that the eyes that glared on me were only glass ones.



"And," continued the lady, "I want you to advise me what is best to do for her, for in truth she is not in the spirits she used to be in before she came here. She was never gay, but now she is positively depressed."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure; every one has noticed it; Annie Barham, and Charles, and even that empty old Graysbrooke. She is nervous, too—the other day, when some one was suddenly announced, she was leading me across the room, and I felt her whole frame shrink and tremble."

"Who was the somebody?"

"I forget—it does not matter—stay—I think it was yourself, or your Assistant, but I really am not sure."

"Give her more amusement, Lady Janet—send her into the open air—a drive with Miss Barham, now and then, or a ride on horseback, with Sir Charles and his little boy."

"I don't believe that would do her much

good. My belief is, that she is dissatisfied with her position. Let us find her a new one—suppose we give her a good husband, Dr. Crofton ?”

“In good time ; your ladyship will find no difficulty in that, I should say !”

“Is she so very handsome ?”

“There can be no difference of opinion there—she is remarkably handsome.”

“Dr. Guy, I have made up my mind that *you* would be exactly the husband for Miss Gilroyd.”

“I ! Lady Janet ?” the sudden suggestion nearly took my breath away ; “why honour me by your selection rather than—than my Assistant, for instance ? who is younger and better looking than I am ?”

“Because, in the first place, Miss Gilroyd hates Mr. Wentworth.”

“Are you sure of that ?” I asked, doubtfully.

“Quite certain, and no love is lost between them ; why, cannot you see how

marked is their avoidance of each other on every occasion ?”

Well, yes, I had seen that ; but I was not quite satisfied of the correctness of the old lady’s inference from the fact, as regarded one of the pair, at least, but I did not think it necessary to impart my vague suspicions. She went on :

“ Wilmot Price—you know what a gossip he is, he knows something about everybody—he told me that Mr. Wentworth and his family had been ruined by the fraudulent bankruptcy of Miss Gilroyd’s father or uncle—naturally, that would cause constraint between them, if not actual dislike. Besides, he is poor, he cannot keep a wife, and does not want one. You, Dr. Crofton, are rich ; they tell me you are going to give up practice, and set up as country squire at Rosebank ; you must have a wife, and Rosamond will suit you exactly.”

“ She may not think so, madam.”

“ You must persuade her to think so,—

she is already interested in you ; she takes the greatest pleasure in hearing you spoken of, she often asks questions about you, of Miss Barham and Monica."

"What sort of questions?"

"Oh, I can hardly say ; but they prove that she likes to talk of you. You have been very courteous to her, and she is flattered and grateful ; I am certain that there is not a man in Cleobury in whom Miss Gilroyd is so interested as she is in you."

Dear me ! this was very pleasant hearing—and none the less so that it was wholly unexpected. Rosamond certainly *had* seemed to like me a little, though her regard had only been expressed by one of her rare smiles, now and then, when she greeted me, and once—yes, once, she assuredly blushed ; but that day Wentworth was with me, and I had thought it possible that the blush was for him.

Lady Janet could not read in my face the

effect of her words, and she grew impatient at my silence.

“Well, Doctor, what do you say? will you think of it seriously? You are wealthy now, you can afford to marry without money; you will need a young and pretty wife, a lady, too, to be mistress of Rosebank. There is no girl of your acquaintance who will grace that position so well as Miss Gilroyd—she will be so happy with you, and so grateful to you for the home she will owe to you. I shall leave you to think of it—it is past eleven o’clock. Be so good as to ring for my maid—ring twice. Thanks; I shall not expect a decision from you at once, but I wish you to think it over. Good night.”

As I was leaving the house, Sir Charles popped out of the library.

“Doctor! what a time you have been closeted with my mother-in-law—where is Miss Gilroyd?”

“In her own room, Sir Charles—ages ago.”

"Anything very wrong the matter with her?"

"Not much, I think ; a little *ennui*—you must get up some little gaiety to divert her."

"We are so confoundedly dull here—no wonder she is bored ; my mother treats her too much *de haut en bas*, and it is a shame, for she is a lady, and ought not to be treated like a servant-maid."

"But she is not, surely ; Miss Barham is kind to her, and Monica is like a sister to her : she has no cause for unhappiness in the way she is treated here, I am sure. And you are very attentive to her, besides,—she might take some consolation from that."

"I? well, yes, she is my guest, you know—I am bound to do what I can for the poor girl, and then I am *almost* a married man."

"She may be fretting over some personal sorrow that we do not know of."

"Perhaps she is in love?" suggested Sir Charles, a little uneasily, I thought, for "almost a married man."

Bah! one would think I was jealous. I declined to enter on the subject of the young lady's affections, and having ordered my horse round to the door, I bade the Baronet good-night, and rode slowly and thoughtfully home.

What could Lady Janet mean by this sudden fit of match-making?

For a moment, a suspicion crossed my mind, that she had noticed her son-in-law's attention to her beautiful protégée, and was anxious to place an insuperable barrier between him and a possible imprudence. I did not think she cared much for Monica as a daughter-in-law; but she would have seemed a perfect treasure to the proud old woman, in comparison of her salaried dependent.

Still, why should she fear? Sir Charles's admiration was chiefly legible only in his

*looks*, and those, poor Lady Janet could not see. His attentions were merely such as any gentleman might offer to a lady staying in his house, indeed, he had no opportunity of paying more, as he never saw Rosamond except in the presence of his mother-in-law, and that "*enfant terrible*" Charlie, and if I, who had sharp ears, and sharp eyes, and knew how to use them, could see nothing but the most frigid indifference in Miss Gilroyd's manner of receiving his courtesies, is it likely that her blind mistress could have detected more? No, in proposing the girl to me as a wife, she had only her happiness in view. Beautiful?—yes, she was very beautiful. What eyes!—what hair, and what a figure! Monica looked quite a dairy-maid beside her. I was forgetting Monica, but Sir Charles was the bar there—confound Sir Charles, he cannot have *both* the girls!—which would I leave him had I the choice? And have I *not* the choice? Can I remem-



ber Monica's soft words and glances, and doubt that if I could be disloyal to my friend, I need not fear a repulse? And though I can scarcely accept Lady Janet's assurance that Rosamond cares for no man in Cleobury but me, I know that she never glances at Sir Charles, never smiles on Roland, as she does on Guy Crofton.

Then again, there's Roland. I strongly doubt the reality of that young gentleman's indifference to Miss Gilroyd; it is too marked to be sincere or natural, and as for his hating her because her uncle ruined him—that is “bosh.” *She* did not manage the banking business, and she is a greater sufferer from it than he is; but one thing is evident, that his coldness, whether real or feigned, has piqued and wounded her. So much the better for me, if—“Many a ball is caught on the rebound,” and many a belle too.

The delicate, sympathising devotion of a man experienced in feminine natures, is so

soothing, when the stupid egotism of these young fellows has blundered on their tender susceptibilities—ah! “*si la jeunesse savait.*”

Guy Crofton, my friend, one thing is certain; the time is past when you could with impunity bask in the sunny smiles of beauty, unfearing the world's dread challenge, “What does he mean by it?” No more may you linger in the flowery maze of flirtation, fearless of straying into the *cul-de-sac* of a formal proposal; that was all very well for the country surgeon, with five hundred pounds a year; but the country squire, the landed proprietor with two thousand pounds, is a steed of another hue! If you win you must wear; and Lady Janet says truly, that Rosebank must have a mistress.

That little enchantress, Monica, I must keep out of her way. To-night, I nearly made a fool of myself—she is not free; but Sir Charles has no right to hover round

Rosamond as he does, it is not fair to Miss Graysbrooke ; and if Roland cares for her he ought to say so, as I suppose he would if he did, and had any chance—I have a good mind to ask him.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE BEAR IN HIS DEN.

"You love all, you say,  
Therefore, dear, abate me,  
Just your love, I pray,  
Shut your eyes, and hate me !"

MRS. BROWNING.

THE next day I received an opportune summons to visit Mrs. Gabriel Hartopp at Rosebank. I call it opportune, because, my thoughts having turned so much upon Rosebank lately, I was glad of an excuse that would take me there, without appearing to go for a formal survey of the premises, that would immediately have caused all Cleobury to ring with a hundred ridiculous reports of my future plans, and having

as yet decided on none myself, I did not desire the opinion of my neighbours upon what they considered most expedient for me.

Some five or six years back I had invested a sum of money on this little estate and a very unsuccessful investment it had hitherto proved. It was a good-sized, good-looking house enough, which had been built by a rich Staffordshire iron-master, who had taken a fancy to the country, and who spared no expense in erecting and fitting it up. There were some twenty or thirty acres of land belonging to it; the grounds surrounding it were tastefully planted, and altogether it promised to become a very pretty place, but unfortunately the owner died from a fall from his horse in the first year he took possession of it. His heirs quarrelled and went to law about his property, and the house, deserted and neglected, fell speedily out of repair, as forsaken houses do.

After some years it was offered for sale, for less than it had cost to build it, and I became the purchaser, expecting to find a tenant for it, who would pay me good interest for my money, until I could retire from practice and make it my own home. But hitherto no tenant had offered who did not require more outlay in the shape of alterations and repairs than I was disposed to make, and for the last six months I had suffered our curate and his bride to occupy it, at a nominal rent, to keep it aired and weather-tight. There was no other place for them to go to, as, during the Rector's absence, the rectory was being altered, and there was only one wing of it, in which his sister was quartered, which was not pulled in pieces, and made an uninhabitable chaos of bricks and mortar.

I went to Rosebank, and as I walked up the carriage-drive, I paused more than once to look round me, and picture it to myself as it would look, say two years hence, when

nicely set in order and trimly kept,—the home of Guy Crofton and his bride! If only I could make up my mind who that sweet bride should be! Not such a one as Mrs. Gabriel, thought I, anyhow,—as she rose from the sofa where she was sprawling when I came in, with her hair all rough-and-tumble, and a scarlet flannel robe clinging round her, in which she looked like nothing more shapely than a huge stick of red sealing-wax.

“You are all right, Mrs. Hartopp,” said I, when I had listened patiently for half-an-hour to her complaints and fears. “You would be quite well if you would only go into the fresh air oftener, instead of shutting yourself up in a room heated like a stove.”

“But I do, Doctor—I was out yesterday; Gaby and I went into Cleobury, and we heard *such* a piece of news!”

“Oh, of course! there is always news to

be heard in Cleobury—what was it about this time ?”

“That you were going to turn us out at Lady-day, and coming to live here, with your wife.”

“Aha !—is it true, think you ?”

“I daresay it is true about the wife—everybody says so.”

“And who is the wife to be ?”

“Oh ! you naughty man ! trying to look so innocent !” and Mrs. Gabriel, trying to look arch, squinted at me with appalling slyness. “As if *I* could have any hesitation in naming the lady—after what I have seen ! But the village folk do talk such nonsense. Mrs. Prew, the grocer’s wife, would have it that Miss Graysbrooke had broken off her engagement with Sir Charles, and was going to marry *you* ; and Miss Reckman, the brewer’s daughter, said, ‘No, you had been accepted by Lady Janet’s companion, the tall girl with the dark eyes,’ Miss—Miss—”



"Miss Gilroyd ; and which of these reports do *you* credit, Mrs. Hartopp ?"

"Of course I said you were not *quite* such an old goose as to marry a girl young enough to be your grand-daughter. I did not *name* the lady—'honour bright,' you know, Doctor. I only said she would be of suitable age for you—though I'm sure I don't know why you have both been so long making up your minds."

Bother the woman—I could have choked her ! That she should go about circulating such an absurd report, and bringing Miss Barham's name forward ! Of course it did not matter to *me*—but poor Annie ! it must be so painful to her feelings—and perhaps even re-kindle hopes that must again be disappointed. I was horribly annoyed, but it was no use showing my annoyance to Mrs. Gabriel. She had the sensitiveness of a rhinoceros herself, and about as much regard for the sensitiveness of others. Still, she must be checked in

spreading such mischievous rumours, so I said, as carelessly as I could—

“Well, Mrs. Hartopp, as for my coming to live here, that may, or may not be ; you will, of course, have timely notice of that event—but I must most emphatically deny that there is any probability whatever of Miss Barham’s coming with me.”

“Really and truly, Doctor?”

“Really and truly, Mrs. Gabriel.”

“There ! I said so, Gaby darling !” (as that blessed individual entered the room,)

“Did not I tell you ? Miss Barham has refused Dr. Crofton at last !”

And, in an ecstasy of exultation, Mrs. Gaby flung her arms round her husband, and swayed him backwards and forwards with a conjugal playfulness, enough to make one *see-sick* !

“Refused him, has she ?” said the victim of these endearments, disengaging himself as best he could from the flannel arms that encircled him ; “then she has less sense

than I gave her credit for, to refuse such a good fellow, and such a kind husband as he would be."

"Really, Mrs. Hartopp," I remonstrated, warmly, "it is most unjustifiable in you to make such assertions. Miss Barham would very probably refuse me, but she has never yet had the opportunity of doing so."

"The more shame for you, then! when I saw you, with my own eyes, kissing her, not a month ago."

Even the Reverend Gabriel thought it necessary to interfere—

"Patty! Patty!—you must not say such things; you have offended Dr. Crofton."

"She has not offended me," I said, as unconcerned as I could, rising to depart; "I am never offended at a lady's little jests at my expense; but whether or not Miss Barham will be offended when she hears such assertions are made, or whether the

.

Rector will like such things said of his sister, is another affair altogether."

And with this parting shot I walked away, devoutly hoping that when I was gone the terrified curate would give that charming help-meet of his a thorough good thrashing. I think he did, too, for as I passed the drawing-room windows I heard the voices of the pair raised in angry dispute; and then a hysterical yell from the lady gave me hopes that the down-trodden Gabriel was at length asserting his lawful supremacy, and I went away sweetly smiling to myself. Mrs. Gabriel suffers under the disease of back-biting—for which I should like to prescribe the local stimulant of a good whipping. I don't think I would much mind administering it, either! Anyway, there are cases in which the crime of wife-beating may be viewed with indulgence—if not with sympathy.

When I reached home, lo! Major Graysbrooke and his bewitching daughter stood

at my door. The old Major, all fuss and fidget, explained, as he came in, that he was the bearer of a message from Lady Janet, requesting me and Mr. Wentworth to join the family party at Heath Hill, on the following evening, to hold a discussion respecting an entertainment that was projected for the amusement of some expected guests, and for the young ladies.

“And for the amusement of the old lady, too, papa!” cried Monica, “it is quite as much to amuse Lady Janet as to amuse me or Rosamond.”

“As for Rosamond,” said the Major, rather scandalized that the name of her ladyship’s companion should be brought into juxtaposition with that of her future daughter-in-law, “as for Rosamond, my dear, she is not exactly, eh Doctor? not precisely entitled to any share in the amusements at Heath Hill. By the ‘young ladies,’ I rather think her ladyship means my little girl, the Misses Danvers, and Miss Comber-

hill." Then with a hasty deprecation, that seemed to me rather suggestive of an indiscretion on Lady Janet's part, he added, "Not but that Miss Rosamond is a fine girl—eh, Doctor? a splendid girl—who would grace any position; but just at present she has not—eh?—she is not in any recognised position in the society of Cleobury; more's the pity! Well, Dr. Crofton, shall I say you and Wentworth will be at Heath Hill to-morrow night?"

"You may answer for me, Major, but I cannot speak for Wentworth; he is in the surgery, just now."

"Ah!" said Monica, softly, "I was sure Mr. Wentworth would be out, papa. Dr. Guy told me he always was, at this hour."

"At this hour?—nay, my dear child," (I felt quite paternally towards Monica to-day), "you are mistaken; he is always *in* at this hour. He is in the surgery now; I will send for him."

And I rang the bell, and gave the mes-

sage to Mrs. Pritchard, who presently returned with the abrupt answer, "Mr. Wentworth was making up some medicine for a patient who must have it immediately, and he could not come."

"Ah, well," said the Major, good naturedly, "business must be attended to, he is quite right not to leave his post, you will give him our message, Crofton."

But Monica—inconsistent little puss!—took into her head that the message required an answer; and she proposed going to Mr. Wentworth, since he could not come to her, "And I want to see the surgery—the dear old surgery! I have not been there, since I was quite a tiny thing; and my nurse took me there, and Mr. Swinely took one of my teeth out—look! this tooth it was!" and she put up her rosy face, and parted her cherry lips, to show me a very pearl, that had replaced the one Swinely had extracted years ago. "Fancy me a little child again, Dr. Guy, going to the

surgery for the nice syrup you used to give me there."

And she slipped her delicately gloved hand into mine, and tripped to the surgery, while the old Major followed. We found Roland Wentworth sitting on a table, in his shirt-sleeves, with a felt hat on his head, pounding away, for dear life, with a pestle and mortar, while a clownish-looking husbandman with an anxious face stood beside him, watching the process silently. One thing I will say for Roland, that, be where he may, do what he may, he always looks the thorough gentleman. Not the fine gentleman, but the truer gentleman whose natural grace of air and manner is less the result of external proportion or culture, though not independent of these, than of inward refinement. Preparing a pill is not an aristocratic employment, it is decidedly more utilitarian (though some could even dispute that) than romantic; and a man in his shirt-sleeves and a felt hat, would look



much out of place in a drawing-room. But then the occupation befitted the place, that's something ; the costume befitted the occupation, that's more ; and the figure of the wearer would have become the most fashionable attire, and adorned the most elegant drawing-room ; and that, to one of the spectators, was doubtless most of all !

He lifted the hat from his dark curls, as the young lady came in, but without desisting from his employment, and said smiling, " Your humble servant, Miss Graysbrooke, (thump, thump) if you will venture into a bear's den, you must look to find a bear's manners, (thump, thump). My friend, James Cole here, must go back by the two train, his sick wife is waiting for her medicine, (thump, thump), and I must attend to it before I can put my coat on."

" Well, Mr. Wentworth," said Monica, " you will let me look at you, will you not ? I will sit here till you have done, and then I will give you my message." And so say-

ing, she climbed on a high stool in front of him, and looked on as earnestly, and with as grave an interest in her blue eyes, as if she had come there to learn the business.

Meantime, the old Major's attention had been attracted by a great bottled snake, a specimen which had been sent me from India; and with whose agreeable contour, it seems, the Major had been familiar, in his days of foreign service. He called me to his side, and began telling me a long stuttering story of a narrow escape he had once had from the fangs of such a reptile.

But while I listened to him deferentially, my eyes still wandered to his daughter, and my ears were open to hear her prattle with my Assistant. "You are to come," (I heard her say), "Dr. Guy is coming, and so you must."

"The very reason I must not, Miss Graysbrooke, and the very reason I need not; Lady Janet cannot want us both."

"She does. She wants *you* particularly ; we cannot settle anything without *you*."

Roland lifted his eyebrows incredulously.

"No, *indeed* !" she continued, "we think of having readings from Shakspeare, or recitations from the old Poets, and Rosamond says, you are up in all those things."

Mr. Wentworth thumped on vigorously, without replying.

"You *will* come, will you not ?" (very coaxingly).

"Take care, Miss Graysbrooke ! you put your finger into my mortar, and I might have reduced it to a pulp !"

"Will you join us to-morrow, Mr. Wentworth ?"

"We will see about it."

"It is not for *me*, you know—of course you would not come to please *me*—it is to cheer poor Rosamond, she is very delicate, we are all quite anxious about her."

The pestle remained suspended in mid air, and Roland's eyes dwelt a moment on

Monica's face, as if he would have spoken. But he did not; down came the pestle again with vehemence, and a piercing shriek from the young lady brought her father and me to her side.

She had forgotten Roland's warning to her to keep her fingers from his mortar, and down upon those fragile fingers had descended the merciless pestle with such a whack! No wonder she shrieked, poor darling!

My Assistant was human, after all; when he saw the mischief he had done—saw the poor bruised hand, and the bright tears standing in the poor little girl's eyes, he was unfeignedly distressed and softened, and laying aside the mortar, applied himself with tenderness to remedy the evil.

It was not serious, after all. Monica's glove had saved her hand, and although she suffered him to take it gently in his own, to examine the hurt, she refused the lotion I wished to bathe it with, and

soon laughed and sparkled through her tears.

"Now, Mr. Wentworth, I have a claim on you for compensation—and the compensation shall be that you accept Lady Janet's invitation, and join us at Heath Hill, to-morrow night."

"All right! I promise obedience. And now, Miss Graysbrooke, do let me apply this lotion to the hand I have so cruelly injured."

"Oh no, it is nothing—a mere bruise. Kiss it well, as the children say!" and the little minx put up her dimpled hand—rather discoloured now—to Roland's lips.

He smiled kindly—the Beast was yielding to Beauty's spells!—and kissed it with due devotion; but this little scene quite horrified the old Major.

"Monica!" he cried, "for shame! if you are so childish, I must send you back to school again. Come, bid these gentlemen good-bye, and we will go home through

this door ; thank you, Dr. Crofton :” and I accompanied them to the street, and left Roland to finish his pill, which he did with such an air of abstraction, that I should not wonder if he ended by swallowing it !

## CHAPTER VI.

### ROLAND'S IMPERTINENCE.

It was not a family party *that* night at Heath Hill. There were several guests staying in the house ; the two Misses Danvers, of Westmere, with their brother, and old Lady Comberhill, with her daughter Aurelia. The Misses Danvers were quiet, innocent, country girls, with good birth, good fortunes, good looks, and good tempers, but with a very limited experience of the world ; in fact, what they had they were content to receive at second hand, and in minute doses, from their brother, Mr. Augustus Danvers, who considered himself well qualified to instruct them, by virtue of

an occasional run up to London in "the season," and an occasional intimacy with certain "men about town," when they came to Westmere to pop at the partridges.

Lady Comberhill was as deaf as Lady Janet was blind. Each was constantly deploring the other's infirmity, and congratulating herself that it was not her own, and so they got on very well. Aurelia Comberhill was rather a "fast" young lady—quite too rapid for my taste, (which was as well, since she never took any notice of me), but fast as she was, she had run after Sir Charles for two or three seasons without succeeding in running him down, so she was now passing the time by a brisk flirtation with Augustus Danvers, from which they seemed to derive mutual benefit and amusement.

Gentle Annie, of course, was there, and the Rev. Gabriel, whom Sir Charles good-naturedly invited to dinner whenever he could catch him without his objectionable



wife, whose existence Lady Janet steadily ignored.

We were a very jolly party—all old neighbours and acquaintances, if not friends—even Rosamond Gilroyd looked bright, and seemed to have thawed from her usual frosty reserve ; she was off duty, to-night, Lady Janet being occupied in futile efforts at conversation with old Lady Comberhill, through the instrumentality of an enormous, old-fashioned, silver ear-trumpet, of which Lady Comberhill was extremely proud, as being a family heir-loom, as was the infirmity which necessitated its use. One might have supposed they had been transmitted together, but as the trumpet had come from her husband's family, the general belief was that he had married somebody to whom it would be useful, that it might have every opportunity of exhibition.

At present the trumpet was amicably divided between the old ladies—the

owner at one end, Lady Janet at the other.

The girls being good-natured and unaffected, were on terms of cordiality with Rosamond, and Sir Charles's attentions were divided between the Misses Danvers and Miss Graysbrooke, to Miss Gilroyd's great relief, for she seemed always more embarrassed than gratified by his notice of her. Perhaps she was afraid of arousing Monica's jealousy. I do not know whether or not she had received any hint from Lady Janet of the suggestion her ladyship had made to me—I almost fancied she had, for she blushed such a vivid carnation as Wentworth and I entered the room together, and the hand she frankly offered me, trembled—yes—trembled palpably, in mine. I held it a moment longer than I need have done, to assure myself of that fact.

The group was in lively debate when we came in, and we were warmly welcomed.

"Here come the casting votes!" cried Cotgrave. "Come, Crofton—come, Wentworth; it rests with you two to turn the balance, which is even, so far."

"What is the question?" asked Roland, seating himself beside Miss Graysbrooke, when he had exchanged greetings with the others.

"The question is, what form of entertainment shall we decide upon for the amusement of these ladies, and some friends we expect at Christmas?"

"Not a ball!" said Lady Janet, with a little shudder—"anything but a ball; we have had quite enough of that. I vote for something refined and intellectual. Readings from Shakespeare, for instance, or from any of the old classic poets. Modern poetry is too hackneyed now-a-days."

"And I," said Sir Charles, "vote for charades; they are jolly good fun, when they are well got up."

"It is just as little trouble," said Monica,

"to get up a regular dramatic performance, and much more worth doing."

"And Lady Comberhill, and Mr. Har-topp, and Miss Gilroyd, are for a concert."

Lady Janet dived into Lady Comberhill's ear-trumpet, like a bee into a columbine, and buzzed into it—

"Do you vote for a concert, Lady Comberhill?"

"A voice for a concert?" murmured the lady—"no, no, my dear, I have no voice; but I like to hear music," (I should think she would, poor thing, though I doubt if she could hear anything less than an ophicleide—and she would have to get *inside* of that!) "and," continued she, "it is more dignified for young women than acting, and dressing themselves up like men and things." (What the "things" meant, was unexplained).

"And why does Miss Gilroyd prefer a concert?" I asked, softly.

"I have no choice," she answered, care-

lessly. "I take no part in these projected entertainments; but I backed Lady Comberhill and Mr. Hartopp because no one else did."

"The votes," said Sir Charles, "are evenly balanced. I have Miss Barham and Miss Danvers on my side—three; and there are three votes for the others."

"We have four," said Monica—"we count Charlie!"

"I'm for a pantomime!" shouted Charlie, in high glee, "and Mr. Wentworth and Rosamond shall be harlequin and columbine!"

This unexpected allotment of parts to Charlie's two favourites excited a general burst of laughter. I was almost startled by the sweet surprise of Rosamond's laugh. So clear, so musical, the merry peal rang out with a frank, girlish mirthfulness, of which the cold gravity of her usual demeanour had hitherto given no sign. Roland laughed too, but I noticed that

although Rosamond's eyes sought his, he did not look towards her. On the contrary, he bent over Monica, and lightly touched her hand, saying—

“I am still Miss Graysbrooke's debtor—I owe her compensation for injuries inflicted, and I will lay my vote at her feet.”

“And I, Guy Crofton, will split my vote, and give it for a drama first, and charades afterwards—and then every one will be content.”

“So, mamma,” cried the Baronet, “you are in the minority, and must yield with a good grace.”

“Anything you like, children ; only, if you had chosen my Readings, you might have made them as dramatic as you liked, with appropriate dresses and decorations, and you would have had less difficulty in filling up subordinate parts.”

But now came the crowning difficulty of the whole debate. What dramatic piece should be selected for performance ? Of

the melodramas, or "genteel comedies" in vogue, some were too elaborate in scenic effects, others too difficult for amateur performers. Some were too tame—others too "spicy." This last adjective was contributed by Aurelia, who amiably volunteered to act the hero's part to any lady who objected to *real* kissing—but the offer did not seem to be greatly appreciated. Lady Janet suggested one of Joanna Baillie's tragedies. Rejected, as too intensely tragical—or, as Aurelia again expressed it, "too raw-head and bloody-bones!" Mr. Hartopp proposed one of Talfourd's plays. The company knew nothing of them—with the exception of Miss Barham, who negatived the proposal, as necessitating a power of elocution and declamation quite beyond the ability of amateurs.

"Our modern dramatic poets are so few," observed Miss Danvers, "who was a *soupçon* 'cerulean'—except Taylor and Browning.

By-the-bye, what do you say to St. Clement's Eve?"

"Is it very hard to learn?" asked Monica, piteously.

"Miss Gilroyd could tell you—I saw her yesterday so engrossed with it, that she never heard me come into the room when she was reading it."

To my surprise, Rosamond blushed so deeply at this innocent remark, that her face and neck were in a flame; and, what was stranger still, the suffusion was reflected, though more faintly, on the brow of my Assistant. My curiosity was excited, and I instantly proposed that the book should be produced, and the play read aloud, for the approval of the intending performers. Thereupon Miss Gilroyd rose, and said, with an evident effort, that she would go into the library and fetch the book.

"But you needn't," cried Charlie, "it is behind the sofa cushions, I saw you



put it there when Mr. Wentworth came in."

Again Rosamond coloured more deeply than before, but she took the volume from its concealment, and holding it carelessly turned to Annie—"Do you not think, Miss Barham, that 'Colombe's Birthday' is more fitted for drawing-room representation than 'St. Clement's Eve'?"

Annie immediately assented, and so did Lady Janet.

"'Colombe's Birthday' will, I think, be in every way more manageable than Taylor's Tragedy, but we will hear it first; Miss Gilroyd, you will oblige me by reading it aloud to the present audience—she is a splendid reader" (to the trumpet); "and stop—let me see—Mr. Wentworth I know has some poetical taste; he will read the part of Valence with you."

I fully expected that this proposal would have been met with a remonstrance from the young lady, if not a flat refusal, but

women never act as they are expected to do. Rosamond took the book silently, the only expression on her beautiful face, its usual one of haughty reserve. Silently, too, she accepted the chair that Sir Charles officiously placed for her, by the table on which he placed a reading-lamp, but before she began to read, she so lowered the flame that her features were almost in shadow. Roland stood behind her chair, and had to bend low to read his part over her shoulder ; indeed more than once he had some difficulty in making it out. They read remarkably well, both of them, only I thought there was just a little hardness in Rosamond's voice, clear and pure as was its accent. Once, too, it faltered, in the line "And is Love, then, the sole reward of Love?" but, perhaps, that was high art, and it was only "Colombe" who faltered. The readers were highly applauded, and the selection was voted *nem. con.* Then followed the allotment of the parts.

"Miss Graysbrooke," said the Baronet, turning to her with becoming gallantry, "you are the queen of every fête at Heath Hill; will you play 'Colombe'?"

Monica put her curly head on one side—like the petted dove she was.

"I think I can act Colombe, if Rosamond will give me a few lessons in—what do you call it, Mr. Hartopp?—in elocution."

"And I will be the lover," said Sir Charles, silyly.

"Indeed, you won't!" replied his saucy mistress, "a nice mess you'd make of it! you could never remember two consecutive lines in the whole play. Mr. Wentworth shall be Valence, he knows the poem well, and he is the only gentleman I can trust to go through it without blundering."

But to this distinction, flattering as it was, Roland seriously demurred, until his objections were over-ruled by the general voice, and at length he consented to play the part of "Valence," on condition that

his time should not be called upon for attendance at any rehearsals. So it was settled; but there was a slight shade of disappointment on Miss Danvers' brow, and Aurelia Comberhill looked almost sulky. Annie Barham saw it, and with her usual tact, came forward to their relief.

"Now," she said, "we have arranged one part of our programme—but remember, there is only one female character of any consequence in 'Colombe's Birthday,' so we must choose a second piece that will give room for the actresses of our party—Monica, my dear, be as brilliant and as successful as you may, the gentlemen will be dissatisfied if your performance excludes that of Miss Comberhill, who was so admired at the private theatricals at New Parks last winter, or of the Misses Danvers, who supported her so charmingly, both in acting and singing?"

"Oh, certainly," cried Sir Charles quickly taking Annie's hint, "we must have

something more lively—less poetical—than ‘Colombe’s Birthday,’ by way of after-piece—we cannot dispense with the talents of any of these young ladies.”

The cloud cleared away from Miss Danvers’ brow, and Aurelia brightened, too, while Charlie, who, with his eyes opened to their widest, had listened to the readers with more patience than edification, recommenced his capers and his cry—

“A pantomime, papa, or Punch—oh ! do let us have Punch ?”

“The great difficulty,” observed Lady Janet, silencing with a caress her grandson’s obstreperous interruption, “the great difficulty always is, to find a play fitted for drawing-room representation, and for the display of the peculiar talents of our company, (rather limited these)” she added *sotto voce*, and the remark was not put into Lady Comberhill’s ear trumpet, “but I think we can safely commit the selection to Miss Barham ; mind, Annie,

you are to choose a play in which Miss Comberhill shall be heroine, and "Miss Danvers shall sing—only mind, there is to be *no kissing* in it. Then followed an eager discussion of minor details; a skeleton programme of who were to be actors, and who spectators. Major Graysbrooke, all in his glory, understood the management of lights, decorations, dresses, &c.—of course only the masculine dresses, no profane touch would have dared to intrude on the sacred feminine department. While the discussion was at its height, I took advantage of an unguarded movement of Rosamond's, by which her book, "St. Clement's Eve," was left unwatched upon the table, and taking it up, I turned over its pages and read upon the fly leaf, in a well known handwriting—"To Miss Gilroyd, from her devoted R. W." I glanced hastily at this inscription, dated two years back, then closed the book—but I made a note of it, and determined that I would not sleep that

night until I had cleared up the mystery of Mr. Wentworth's past and present relations with the fair girl whom Lady Janet had done me the honour to propose to me, for a bride. I did not wish to act so shabbily by any young fellow, as to throw my wealth and position into the scales against him, to rob him of his sweetheart. If he wants her and can get her, let him take her, but we will have no underhand rivalry. It was late when we broke up, and no sooner were we within our doors than I pounced upon him—

“Now, Roland my boy, you must not walk off to bed for a moment or two, I have a little explanation to ask of you first.”

He looked surprised, but quietly extinguished the bed-room candle he had just lighted, and came back and stood on the hearth-rug, facing me.

“An explanation of what, Dr. Crofton ? I am at your service.”

"You must not think my question a mere impertinence, I have a strong personal interest in it, or I should not presume to ask it."

But here I paused in some perplexity, for was I not committing myself to a certain extent?—what the deuce personal interest had I in the matter after all?

"Well?" asked he, a little impatiently.

"Well, I wish to ask you, what was the nature and degree of your former intimacy with Miss Gilroyd? And what may be your present feelings and intentions with regard to that young lady?"

His eyes glowed—in that strange way they had—and in his voice, though calm and low, there was a note of menace.

"You say you have a personal interest in this inquiry, Dr. Crofton. You must make that clear before you can hope for an explanation on a subject so very personal to *me*."

There! I was in for it now—convicted out of my own mouth. Oh, Guy Crofton,



you *have* made a fool of yourself! Better, far better, had you rested content with the harmless smiles of little Monica. He stood over me, stern, inexorable—there was no possibility of drawing back.

“What is [*your* personal interest in Miss Gilroyd’s past or present intimacies, Dr. Crofton?”

“Why, my dear fellow, you see, Miss Rosamond is a fine girl—a magnificent girl—and a lady, and I might take a fancy to make love to her myself!”

“Make love to her, then,—I do not see why you should want my consent, but since you do there it is for you.” And he turned away.

But that would not do, you know,—I had committed myself too far to stop short, and on I plunged :—

“I was not thinking of asking your consent; what I meant was, to ask whether you had any such feeling for this young lady, as would make it ungenerous in

me to prefer any suit to her, or whether you had any claims that might lessen my chance of success?"

He paused thoughtfully—took two or three turns up and down the room, and came back to where I sat.

"Dr. Crofton, your silly vanity and coxcombry with regard to women, is often quite insufferable!" (civil) "but it is your worst weakness—you are kindly and generous," (much obliged) "and if it will gratify you, I will tell you what have been my past relations with the lady in question, and what they are likely henceforth to be."

I forgot the insolent commencement of this address, in its satisfactory termination, and exclaimed joyfully—

"Come! that's right—there should be no mysteries between friends and house-mates. Let us have this little love-story, for a love-story of course it is. By the way, you said once, that dog of yours had

cost you Rosamond's heart—for it was Rosamond you meant, I know,—how was that ?”

“ It was, perhaps, an unfounded assertion—if Miss Gilroyd's heart had ever been really mine, she would scarcely have withdrawn it for ever in the angry impulse of a moment.”

“ Were you engaged, then ? and why did you break it off ?”

“ We were not engaged. I was deeply attached to her, and was at no pains to conceal an attachment which I had every reason to hope was returned ; but I waited to declare it, until I had taken my degree, and given proof of my earnest intention to follow my profession. I never dreamt of living idly on my own means, far less on hers, for she was then the reputed heiress of a millionaire. When the time came, I returned to my brother's home—which was also mine—I asked Rosamond's hand, and she refused me !”

"The deuce she did!—but what had Vixen to do with that?"

Wentworth hesitated, and then replied :

"I decline repeating that story—it is enough to say that she was the indirect subject of a remonstrance on my part, which offended her mistress, and in the irritation of the moment, as I think, she refused me."

"It was an odd moment to choose for a remonstrance with a lady—the moment you were asking for her love. Nobody but yourself would have thought of such an imprudence. What followed?"

"I quitted Wallingrove immediately, and returned to my work in town. Shortly after, came the crash of Gilroyd and Co.'s failure—the suicide of the bankrupt, and my brother's ruin. In the misery and confusion that ensued in my family I lost all trace of Miss Gilroyd, and never heard of her, or saw her, until (as I have before told you) I came to Cleobury."

"And yet you cherish that brute, which was, as you fancy, the cause of your rejection?"

Roland looked down on the animal, and patted her fondly.

"It was *her* dog," he said, softly. "I found it, neglected and masterless in her wrecked and desolate home. I took it away and have kept it ever since."

"Ah—you may make up your little quarrel, and marry the young lady, even yet?"

"I can never marry—I have not the remotest prospect of being able to support a wife and family."

"You have as fair a prospect as most young men of your class have—if we go on together as well as we are likely to do, in a couple of years you will have all the medical practice of Cleobury, and many miles round."

"That would not alter my position in respect to marriage. The whole income

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arising from your practice would little more than suffice for claims on me, which preclude the possibility of my maintaining an undowered wife."

"And those claims ——"

"Are most sacred to me. My sister Marian, my twin-sister, dearer to me from our infancy, than words can tell, was married four or five years before the Gilroyds came into our neighbourhood, to a young man who had just entered holy orders—the curate of a church in a populous manufacturing town. He had not a shilling, and no clerical interest whatever. My brother thought Marian might have looked higher, but he did not oppose her wishes, nor had he any power to do so, as her fortune was at her own disposal, and was sufficient to maintain her husband and herself in comfort and even affluence. So they were married, and she had but just given birth to her third child, when the Gilroyds' bank broke, and the whole of her fortune, which

my brother had rashly persuaded her to invest in it, was irrecoverably swept away."

"And she is now dependent on you? but is not her husband as able as you are to work for her?—she has surely a stronger claim on him."

"You have not heard the worst; the shock coming at such a time was too much for Marian: always of a delicate constitution, it resulted in hysterical paralysis, and she has ever since been perfectly helpless, unable to rise from her couch or to perform the simplest offices for herself, although her speech and mental faculties remain unimpaired."

"Poor thing! poor thing! but Wentworth, she is young, and hysterical paralysis is not incurable?"

"No; but there are complications in her case, which I will explain to you another time, which made it hopeless from the first. Still though her sufferings are often acute,

she may languish in this state for many years, she needs constant attention, unremitting attendance, everything that can be done to soothe and cheer her. And her husband is a hard-worked curate, with eighty pounds a year, and three children to be clothed, maintained, and educated, above the level of charity. You understand, then, Dr. Crofton, how—whatever may have been, or may yet be my feeling for Miss Gilroyd—it is impossible that I could ever think of her now as my wife ?”

“And you would feel no ill-will against me if—I put it as possible, not probable—I wooed and won her ?”

“Assuredly not ; woo her, and win her if you can.”

“You don’t think she would have me ?”

“How can I tell ? girls make an odd choice sometimes.”

“Upon my word, Wentworth, if I was not the most good-humoured fellow in the world, I should kick you out of doors for



your impudence ! you talk of me as being an 'odd choice,' as if I were a gorilla."

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Crofton," he answered, laughing, "my remark referred only to the disparity in years between Miss Gilroyd and you."

"Yet I am far from having attained the traditional distinction of being 'the oldest inhabitant' of Cleobury ! it is not uncommon for a lady of twenty-five to marry, and be very happy, with a man only twice her age !"

Roland made no answer.

"However, the field is clear, it seems, as far as you are concerned—if you had cared for her, it might have been different. I have heard of women who could love with such unswerving constancy that even the silence of him they loved could not estrange them—who have gone down cheerfully to old age, to the grave, sustained to the last by faith in his unspoken fidelity ?"

And for an instant my wayward thoughts

glanced back to years past. Poor Annie ! if *she* had trusted to my "unspoken fidelity," she had leant on a rotten reed !

Mr. Wentworth turned to the door.

"I have dreamed," he said, "of the possibility of such constancy ; whether it exists—or has ever existed, I cannot say, but I think there would be no darkness in life, no despair in death, if a love so noble and pure flashed its light on eternity." And taking up his bedroom candle, he walked up-stairs, quite forgetting, in his abstraction, that it was not lighted ; and he never found out his mistake either, for the next morning, when I went into his room to fetch something, I saw the candle with the wick unburnt, and the extinguisher on !

So I am a coxcomb, am I, Mr. Wentworth ? Pretty language to hold to your superior in office, and a trifle your senior in age ! I fear I possess no administrative talent for keeping my subordinates in their proper places. Guy Crofton, when you *do*

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get married, you will probably be confoundedly hen-pecked ! And with this melancholy reflection I followed my Assistant to the upper regions, humming my favourite lines to a tune of my own invention—

“ And leads him on from flower to flower,  
A—”

oh, bother ! I did not mean *that* at all.

## CHAPTER VII.

### REHEARSAL.

"The heart which, like a staff, was one  
For mine to lean and rest upon,  
The strongest in the longest day,  
With steadfast love,—is caught away,  
And yet my days go on—go on."

MRS. BROWNING.

THE private theatricals at Heath Hill excited even more interest in Cleobury than Lady Janet's Ball had done, and the more so, because very few of the dwellers in our parish could hope to be witnesses or sharers in the festival, the invitations in this case being strictly limited to Sir Charles's private friends, and to the county families who had been on visiting terms with the late Lady Cotgrave. With the exception of

Wentworth and myself, the Graysbrookes, the Hartopps, and Miss Barham, no one in Cleobury would be present. But the "residents" consoled themselves for their exclusion, by industry in gathering, and assiduity in retailing, every particle of information, authentic or otherwise, that could be collected from any source—from Sir Charles's housekeeper, Lady Janet's maid, the drapers and milliners at Lingford, who assisted in furnishing the dresses and decorations—for Sir Charles goodnaturedly patronised the tradesmen of his nearest town—and the men who came down from London to superintend the arrangements of the scenery and the stage.

Mrs. Gabriel especially signalised herself as news retailer, and from her acquaintance with the families at the Cedars and the Rectory, she was looked upon as a great authority, and might have lived—and perhaps *did* live—for a month, at free cost, as to tea and muffins.

Lady Janet would have excluded her from the list of the invited, if she could, but Annie pleaded so earnestly for her, that the old lady was obliged, reluctantly, to give way.

Miss Barham had not succeeded in finding a dramatic piece in which (as they seemed to wish) everybody could have principal parts to play, so they had determined on *Tableaux Vivants* instead. The "cast" for "Colombe's Birthday" was to comprise, besides Monica and Roland, some friends of Sir Charles, who were more skilful in dramatic gesture and elocution than our rural *dilettanti*.

Everything was going on flourishingly. Heath Hill was all alive with bustle and animation — acting, rehearsing, reciting, attitudinising, flirting, singing, laughing, chatting—from morning till night. Old Major Graysbrooke was in a constant flutter of excitement, all day and every day, directing, suggesting, improving, doing every-

thing but *paying*—he took care that the Baronet should not be defrauded of his right to do *that*.

Lady Janet took but little interest in the tableaux—as was natural, poor woman ; but she took a lively interest in Monica's performance as "Colombe," and had her in her room every day, studying the part with Miss Gilroyd, who was her instructress in it. Rosamond, too, was most unwearied in her efforts to make Miss Graysbrooke enter into the spirit of the part. It was pretty to see the two girls together—one so earnest, so thoughtful, so self-forgetful in assisting in her pupil's triumph—the other so docile and teachable. The task was not difficult, for Monica was very intelligent and impressible, and if—as Roland said she did—she wanted depth of poetic feeling to enter fully into the noble and dignified simplicity of the poet's creation, she had so much feminine "receptivity" and imitative readiness, that she

quickly caught Rosamond's manner of rendering the part; and few among her audience would be likely to miss its spirit—if the spirit would indeed be missing. The whole thing, I confess, was far too grand for me! I should much have preferred some airy vaudeville, in which the girls would have capered and tripped, and showed off their pretty figures and neat ankles, with lots of music and dancing, and—well, as I was not to be one of the actors, I would reverse my wish, as it would have been in different circumstances, and vote with Lady Janet, for “*no real kissing.*” But, of course, I had not sufficient strength of mind publicly to avow such a vulgar, unintellectual taste, and if others were of my opinion, secretly, they were equally cowardly, and kept silence, like me. Wentworth held firm to his resolution to take no part in the proceedings until the final rehearsal, to Monica's extreme annoyance.



"It is so different, you know," she said, "playing Colombe to Rosamond, or to a *real* lover—to a real Valence, I mean. I am sure I shall be quite shy and nervous when I have to recite my part for the first time to Mr. Wentworth. Dear Dr. Guy, *do* persuade him to join our rehearsals before the last comes!"

But Lady Janet interposed—

"Nonsense, Monica, Mr. Wentworth is quite right; he cannot spare so much time from his serious duties. Here is Dr. Guy dancing attendance on your follies, from day to day; and who is to attend to his patients if Mr. Wentworth neglects them as well? It is your own fault; why did you not let Charles play Valence? You might have philandered away to your heart's content with him, and Miss Gilroyd would soon have taught him to give the part properly. He is as apt as you are. Indeed, it is not too late even now; he could learn it in a week; and it would be

in every way more becoming that *he* should play the lover to you, than that Dr. Crofton's Assistant should."

I do not know from what impulse I glanced at Rosamond when Lady Janet said this, and I marked a faint colour rise to her cheek as her eyes met mine. Was it called forth by the old lady's suggestion that Sir Charles should be her pupil—(I am sure he would have offered no objection)—or merely by my steadfast look? But Monica pouted, and turned away, whispering to me—

"Sir Charles!—everything is 'Sir Charles' with his mother-in-law! She had better let him take the whole performance on himself, and call it 'Charles Cotgrave at Home.'"

However, she said no more about Roland's rehearsal. Once only did that young gentleman present himself at Heath Hill during the bustle and excitement of these preparations, and then it was only to come

in search of me. He found me in the midst of a merry, noisy group of intending performers. Some were reciting — some were exhibiting their dresses — all were laughing, talking, or “posing.” Here and there a couple was quiet, but they were the most mischievous of any—for they were flirting! In stalks my knight of the rueful countenance, like a solemn raven among a flock of screaming, gaudy parrots, and drew me aside.

“Dr. Crofton,” he said, anxiously, “I did not find you when I got home this morning,” (he had been up all night with a patient in the next parish), “so I have come on here, as soon as I could, to give you old Edwards’s message. He is very bad, and he fancies he would rather have you with him than me ; he says he is more used to you at his bedside, but you must go at once, or you will be too late—he will scarcely live through to-night.”

“My good boy, if you came here to

give me that message you might have spared yourself the trouble—Edwards is dead.”

“Ah, then you have been there?”

“I came thence half an hour ago—he died just as I entered his door, and then I came on here.”

“You like marked contrasts, it seems,” observed Mr. Wentworth, gravely, glancing at Aurelia Comberhill, who was pretending to smoke a cigarette, while she criticised a *pas-de-deux* danced by a Grand Inquisitor and a Highland chief.

I answered the implied reproach: “A few years hence, my young friend, you will recognise the wisdom of such occasional transitions from ‘grave to gay.’ You will not be less ready to weep with those who weep, when you have learnt to smile with those who laugh.”

“Who talks of weeping?” asked Monica, drawing near us, while Annie Barham looked up wistfully—“Mr. Wentworth,

they are only mimic sorrows that we weep for here to-day."

There is nothing that surprises me so much in Miss Graysbrooke as her extreme versatility. She never, or very rarely, treats Roland with that pretty childishness which so charms and fascinates *me*. There is an earnestness, a seriousness, in her words and looks, when she addresses him, for which those who have not followed her closely in *all* her moods would scarcely give her credit. My belief is, that she possesses the faculty some animals and insects have, of simulating a shape foreign to their own, to mislead their enemies, and that she is *afraid* of Roland. A moment before he came in, she was as rollicking in her mirth and gaiety as Aurelia Comberhill herself, only more feminine—Miss Graysbrooke is always feminine. And now, as she stood, looking up into his eyes, there was a timid deprecation in her manner, that was almost pathetic!

It seemed to please him, however, for he looked down on her, and smiled—

“You must remember, Miss Graysbrooke,” he said, “that I, as Valence, have all the wrongs of Cleves to weep for!”

She brightened back again to the Monica I knew.

“Ah! you are come to the rehearsal?—how good of you. You are in time—we shall begin directly.”

“Not to-day,” he answered; and passing her with a slight bow, he went up to Miss Gilroyd, who was sitting in a corner, mixing some colours on a palette for Charlie, who was engaged in daubing pink and blue jockeys on a large engraving representing the Cup Day at Ascot, and too deeply interested in his artistic efforts, even to spare a look to his favourite Mr. Wentworth.

I watched my Assistant's movement with curiosity, and pricked up my sharp ears, while I pretended to be wholly absorbed

in looking at Miss Comberhill and the dancers ; I observed that Rosamond did not raise her eyes as Roland approached her—did not appear to see him, in fact, until he was close by her side.

“ I trust that Miss Gilroyd is better ? ”

“ Miss Gilroyd is perfectly well, thanks, Mr. Wentworth.”

“ Not so—unless my coadjutor was mistaken in the information he gave me very recently.”

“ I was not quite well,” she answered, indifferently ; “ but that is a long time ago—quite a thing of the past, and with the past Mr. Wentworth does not concern himself.”—(oho !)

“ Now,” thought I, “ Mr. Wentworth, you are ‘ snubbed.’ ”

But the allusion, if it was intended for one, was unnoticed.

“ If I may be forgiven the discourtesy of remarking on a young lady’s looks, Miss Gilroyd, I will say that yours do not bear

out your assertion that you are quite well—you look pale and harassed.”

Not pale now, certainly, for as he spoke she flushed a vivid carnation. “I have over-exerted myself a little lately;—you see” (with a slight accent of bitterness,) “I have grown so unused to gaiety.”

Still he evaded her allusion.

“You have been instructing Miss Graysbrooke in the part of ‘Colombe;’ it is very kind of you.”

“It is my duty,” she answered coldly.

“Is it? I was not aware that you owed any duty to the young lady, except that of friendship.”

She lifted her glorious eyes to his face, but dropped them almost instantly, and her lip curled.

“Her ladyship desired me to teach Miss Graysbrooke her part, and it was my duty to obey her. My position in her—service, precludes the possibility of friendship with a young lady so far above me.”



He made no reply, but gazed silently upon her. I think she was conscious of the look, though still she avoided meeting it.

The Grand Inquisitor had finished his reel, and was glancing rather curiously, in the direction of his little son, but just as he was about to move towards him, Aurelia Comberhill stopped him.

"Come, Sir Charles, we must practise that Tribunal scene again—let us call our troop together."

"Mr. Danvers!—Mary!—Miss Barham, do come and arrange us, please."

There was a scurrying to and fro, which I still affected to watch with interest, while my ears were still pricked towards Rosamond and Roland, and I edged a little nearer to them.

Meanwhile, my Assistant had deprived Charlie of the chair he was using as an easel, and seated himself thereon, close to Miss Gilroyd, who was every bit as absorbed

in Charlie's paintings as *I* was in the noisy group at the other end of the room, whose noise, by the way, drowned the words of Roland's, which preceded these—

"You are punctilious in your duty to Lady Janet, but do you owe none to the friends who take interest in your welfare—who suffer with and for you?"

"The dependent—the degraded—have no friends."

"Dependence is not necessarily degradation."

"Not necessarily ; but when as in my case, it is associated with dishonour—"

"Miss Gilroyd, that dishonour, so terribly expiated, can never reflect upon you ; in any case but your own, you would disclaim the injustice of assuming that it could do so. The world does not judge so harshly."

She looked up at last, looked fixedly at him.

"The world !" she repeated slowly, then

after a pause, "do *you* see in me no reflection of that dishonour? do *you* think me in no degree degraded by it? Am I to *you* in every respect unchanged—undimmed—the Rosamond you knew at Wallingrove three years ago?"

He seemed about to answer impetuously, but checked himself, faltered, and looked away from the eyes that dwelt so searchingly on his. Searchingly, wistfully, and with a strange, eager light in them, that even as they gazed, sank out and died away; and she resumed in a cold, hard voice, in which was a forced and jarring lightness—

"Whatever you do, Mr. Wentworth, don't *pity* me, please! be the world's judgment what it may, it concerns me no longer. I accept my present position without reference to that I held in the past. Like *you*, I never look back!"

"If," said Roland, and his tone had little of its accustomed steadiness, "if I could

only feel that you had strength and courage to accept the trials of your position, and discharge its duties with cheerful energy, not with mere sullen acquiescence ; that, standing in the shadow, you could wait patiently—look up hopefully—for such sunshine as may fall on you even *there* ; if I could only give you that strength—”

She turned to him again, still wistful, but more sad.

“ *Would* you give me that strength ? you could if you would ; oh, Roland ! I am so lonely ! so forsaken ! ”

*Now*, Mr. Wentworth, look to yourself ! Your determination to retain your freedom, must be stronger than any *I* have ever had, if it can resist such an appeal.

For a moment I thought he was giving way, and that Lady Janet’s match-making would come to grief ; Guy Crofton, good-bye to *your* chance if you ever had one. No, he holds firm ; his eyes remain bent on the ground, his lips quiver. The silence

was momentary only, but it was enough for Rosamond. I could see by her heightened colour that she was humiliated by her consciousness of self-betrayal. He spoke calmly, kindly—but oh, so coldly!

“You are weak and nervous, dear Miss Gilroyd, your mental strength is lowered by physical debility. Dr. Crofton must see to this; you know I may not try to rob our friend Dr. Guy of the laurels he hopes to win, by restoring you to health.”

But still he did not look at her, I noticed that. While he was speaking the Grand Inquisitor approached, and leant over his little boy.

“Why, Miss Gilroyd!” he cried laughing, “are you presiding over Charlie’s studies? In what School of Nature or Art did he learn to paint horses green like grasshoppers?”

Rosamond turned to the speaker with a sudden smile. I wonder did he, in his conceit, attribute the glow on her cheek to *his* arrival on the scene? Charlie resented the

parental comment by a dab at him over his shoulder with his brush, which transferred the objectionable tint to the Inquisitorial nose. I left them to settle the dispute between them, and followed my Assistant out of the room. Ah, Mr. Roland Wentworth, you have had your innings, and missed your stroke, it is *my* play now—if I choose.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### FIE UPON ME!

THE day before that on which the grand "histrionic display," as Major Graysbrooke magniloquently styled it, was to come off, it had set in a bitter black frost, which coming suddenly upon some days of heavy rain, made the roads as slippery as glass, and promised us surgeons a mournful harvest of broken limbs. I thought it not unlikely that I might furnish the harvest, instead of reaping it, as I rode slowly on my jaded horse down the Long Mynd, when I was returning late in the evening from attendance on a patient, six miles off. She was all right at present, at any rate.

My mind was perfectly at ease on her account, but not at all on my own.

In the first place, my horse was knocked up. Of the three of which my modest stud consisted, Roland had taken one to Lingford that afternoon, the other was lame, and unfit for work, and the one I now rode was scarcely fitter, for my Assistant had ridden him some fifty or sixty miles within the last two days, and he was done for. My Assistant cost me a great deal in the wear and tear of horses; not that he was cruel or inconsiderate in his treatment of them. I do not think he would have overtasked one of them for his own pleasure; but in his views of duty he was harsh and uncompromising, and did not exempt the brute creation from their share in the world's great work and suffering. When the demands on his time were urgent—when some sufferer lay waiting for relief—Roland would ride like the very devil, paying very little heed to the ease or com-



fort with which the animal he bestrode would perform the journey—and quite as little, I must say, to his own. The number of horse-shoes he wore out was something terrific! If I offered a mild remonstrance, it was totally disregarded.

“If you will keep more horses,” he would answer, “each shall have its due season of rest.”

“But you know I can’t afford more, my good fellow; they eat up a great deal of our profits as it is.”

“Then they must take their chance of occasional over-work; their lives were not given them, any more than ours, for unearned enjoyment. Better a horse should be weary and foot-sore, than that a man should writhe a needless hour in agony, or that a mother should weep a moment longer than can be helped over the cradle of her moaning child.”

I never argued with Roland; there was no use in doing it; his own way he would

have—and as it was not a bad way on the whole, I left it to him. Then he would smile his pleasant smile, and say—

“It is better for the horse, too, Dr. Guy—they have their part in the great world-mystery of self-sacrifice, who knows but they will have their part, too, in its consummation and reward—‘subjected in hope.’”

“Oh, that’s very fine; but I am much more concerned in the present deterioration of my horse-flesh than in its possible future glorification! Here’s Tremadoc cost me forty-five pounds last June, and he has not six months’ more ‘go’ in him!”

Some such melancholy reflection saddened my thoughts this evening, as my tired horse stumbled and “slithered” down the great hill that rose to the north of the valley of the Tyme. He was worse after his seven hours’ rest at Brakesdell than he had been when I first took him out. They had placed him in a draughty old shed of

a stable, and his limbs were stiffened, poor beast. And there was the great Silverdene rock to descend, too, before I could reach Cleobury, and I was exhausted by my long day's anxiety, and cold and chilled to the bones. "Hold up!—Get up!" I may say, for the brute is down!—fallen on the frozen brook that flooded the road I was crossing, with a slip and a flounder, as if he were trying to skate on it—and making me feel that it was decidedly safer to trust to two legs of one's own than to four of somebody else's. And on raising him I found that I had not even the alternative, for the poor animal's weakness had culminated—so to say—in that prostration, and he tottered and trembled to such a degree that my weight would as infallibly have upset him again as if he had been a rickety chair. I looked helplessly round. I was but three miles from Cleobury, but it was now snowing fast; the sleety wind blew into my left ear sharp and shrill; the

road was a sheet of ice, and the difficulty of keeping my feet was considerably complicated by the necessity of holding up my horse. In such circumstances, the three miles would not be got over before midnight. Happily every inch of the road was as familiar to me as my own garden-walks, and I knew that by turning a little to the right I should reach a by-lane, which would take me by a short cut to Heath Hill, where Sir Charles would allow me to leave my wretched horse, and let one of his people drive me home. Encouraged by this hope, I struggled bravely on my way, and glad enough I was when I saw the lights gleam from among the leafless trees in the windows of Heath Hill. I led my horse round to the stables, committed him to one of the grooms, and hastened to join Sir Charles in the dining-room. The ladies had retired, which I was not sorry for, since I was not in trim to present myself before them—tired as a dog, hungry and cold.

However, a good dinner, a roaring fire, and a few glasses of my host's "particular," soon refreshed and invigorated me; and then I proffered my request for the loan of the dog-cart to take me home. But to this the Baronet opposed a resolute denial.

"Very sorry, Doctor, but it cannot be done. There is not a horse in my stable fit to take out to-night. The grooms have been kept for the last week racing backwards and forwards to Lingford or Olbury, after all sorts of things—the ladies are constantly wanting something—sending messages to drapers and milliners, this being the eve of the great day—by Jove! the pace has been terrific! Not a horse is left fit to carry a groom, nor a groom fit to mount him. Complete exhaustion of animal power! Then it snows feather-beds, and the roads are impassable at this hour. You must stop here to-night."

"With all my heart, Sir Charles—but have you any room for me? I do not know

where you contrive to stow away the guests you have already !”

“ Nor do I—Mrs. Green sees to that. I say, Wilcox,” (to a servant who was coming into the room), “ ask Mrs. Green to step this way, will you ? Mrs. Green !” as that functionary swept in, in her rustling silks, and dropped an inquiring curtsy to the party, which had thinned since my arrival, as all the younger, and many of the older gentlemen, had left us to join the ladies in the drawing-room—“ Mrs. Green, can’t you put up Dr. Crofton somewhere for to-night ? we could not turn a dog out of doors in this snow-storm.”

“ Oh, dear, Sir Charles, I really don’t know how I *can* do it ; there is not a bed in the house that is not bespoken.”

“ Any shake-down will do for me, Mrs. Green—it will not be the first, nor the fiftieth time, that I have slept on a sofa, or in an easy-chair, all night.”

“ The very sofas is bespoke, Dr. Crofton.

I'm going to have one. I have given up my bed to the young gentleman as is going to play the Fool to-morrow."

"Your bed is a big one, if it will accommodate all the gentlemen who will play the fool to-morrow, Mrs. Green—perhaps I myself may be entitled to a share of it!"

"No, Doctor, it isn't a big one," (if not, how could Mrs. Green's ample frame find rest therein?) "and indeed, Sir Charles, I don't know what we can do for Dr. Guy."

"Can't he have Charlie's bed—the boy can sleep with me!"

"He *has* been a sleeping with you these three hours, Sir Charles; the dressmaker from Lingford has got his bed!"

"Who has Miss Gilroyd's room? I suppose *she* has gone into my mother's?"

"Lady Janet's maid sleeps with her, and the Misses Danvers have got the maid's room, and Miss Graysbrooke is to sleep with Miss Gilroyd."

"Miss Graysbrooke ?—I thought she was going home to-night."

"She could not, she has all her things here—a trunk as big as that table, Sir Charles."

"Well, there's Miss Gilroyd's dressing-room—can't a bed be made up there ?"

"Why, Sir Charles, there is a bed made there ; you ordered it yourself, for old Mr. Selwyn."

"So I did, but Mr. Selwyn has been hurried off, since dinner, by a telegram from Winchley ; he had to walk to the train, poor fellow—and so Dr. Crofton can have that bed, Mrs. Green."

"Very well, Sir Charles !"

"But you are not satisfied, I fear, Mrs. Green ?" said I, for the good lady hesitated and looked at me, wistfully.

"Well, Dr. Crofton, you see, the dressing-room opens into Miss Gilroyd's room, and of course you can hear every word that's said there ; and young ladies like to



laugh and chat together, and so I thought to put Mr. Selwyn into the next room to theirs, because he is stone deaf, and couldn't hear, not if they bawled at him."

"And the Doctor has very sharp ears, and you doubt his discretion? never mind, Mrs. Green, let him have the room, and I'll give the young ladies due warning."

"And for your further security, Mrs. Green, I will go to my bed directly, if it is ready, for I am dead tired, and before the drawing-room party breaks up I shall be too sound asleep to hear anything more readily than deaf Mr. Selwyn."

Accordingly I was conducted to my chamber, a dressing-room, opening into the bedroom adjoining it by a door which was at present blocked up by a small bed, fitted up for the temporary exigence.

The first part of my engagement to Mrs. Green was certainly kept, for my head had scarcely pressed the pillow ere I was wrapped profoundly in the sleep of inno-

cence ; from which, alas ! I awoke to something like guilt ! But, at least, the awakening was no fault of mine.

A whisper, silver-soft, was breathed, as it seemed to me, into my very ear, trickling into it, upon a current of cold air, and the words it syllabled were—

“The door is bolted on the other side, but there isn’t any key !”

I started wide awake in a moment, and before the next sentence was uttered I had mastered the situation. My fair neighbours had come up to their apartment, and were reconnoitring through the key hole, over which, as the speaker turned away, she forgot to push down the shield ; and this key-hole was on a level with my ear as I lay.

Then followed another whisper, “Who sleeps in that room, Rosamond ?”

“Mrs. Green said a Mr. Selwyn was to sleep there.”

“Oh, what a comfort !” in Monica’s

usual tones, "he's as deaf as Hood's old lady,

"Who might have worn a percussion cap,  
And been knocked on the head without hearing it  
snap.'

we may chatter as much and as loud as we like—oh dear—" and then came a long yawn—"how tired I am!"

Now what ought I to have done? To have tapped at the wall to announce the propinquity of an individual with a very acute sense of hearing? I scarcely think that would have been correct. I really did not see my way to doing anything but lying still; and being very sleepy, I should at that juncture have been glad if the dear girls had held their tongues for five minutes more, and let me fall asleep again. But bless you, girls cannot hold their tongues!

There was a rustling here and there, a pattering across, a pushing of chairs, a wheeling of fauteuils, a stirring of fire, and

all to such a running accompaniment of laughter and chatter, and snatches of song—how *could* a fellow sleep through it? and yet I think I was just dozing off to a musical murmur of “unbecoming,” “great big bows,” not *beaux* I fancy, “not too short, the footlights will show all our legs,” (*that sounded rather centipedal*).

I was certainly dozing off, when I was aroused to full consciousness by hearing my own name. I could *hear* of course, as plainly as if I were seated beside them, and an evil sprite whispered to me, “Wouldn’t you like to *see*?”

I yielded to the temptation.

Of course, after this confession, I shall be sent to Coventry. I can imagine the storm of contempt and execration that will be hurled at my guilty head ; but, oh, my brothers ! consider the temptation, and if you cannot pardon my fault, do not stoop to profit by it—turn away with stopped ears and closed eyes, from the narrative of what

in my unmanly baseness, I heard and saw through that key-hole.

This is what I saw. A blazing fire, on either side of which, full within the limited range of my vision, sat a resplendent form, each engaged in the ravishing occupation of brushing her hair.

*Her* hair? sneers some cynical satirist—credulous of that impossible monster—born of cold hearts and impure imaginations, the so-called “girl of the period.” Yes, cynic, here at least, there were no false braids, no “frisettes” even; if you doubt me, may you wake on your first morn of marriage, to find your bride’s *head* indeed upon your pillow, but her hair on the toilet-table, and her teeth in a tumbler! One might as well have accused Monica’s poodle of wearing a wig, as herself, with her short waving curls, and if the very wealth of Rosamond’s massive braids had favoured the unworthy suspicion, it must have been utterly dispelled as she took out a comb here, a pin

there, and "showered the rippling ringlets to her knee."

Now I say deliberately that a pretty woman can be seen to no greater advantage than when performing this act of toilet fascination. That the ancients thought so is proved by the fact of their representing the syrens with combs in their hands (the brush as yet, I suppose, not invented); the syrens combed their flowing tresses before their mirrors, and the grace of the action was such as even to neutralise the rather serious drawback of fishes' tails. What must be its effect when there is no such drawback?

Rosamond's slight figure was draped in spotless white—a pure white robe drawn close with a violet ribbon round her slender throat, and fastened with a violet girdle round her delicate waist. The sleeves of this dress were tied with violet ribbons round her wrists, and it swept down to her feet. Her dark hair flowed in heavy

masses over her bosom, and lay in rich profusion on her arms. Her face, partly turned from me, showed in clear profile against the fire-light, and on her pale cheek the long black eyelashes flung a deepened shade. She looked cold, noble and chaste, as a virgin priestess of the sun.

Monica, like the rosebud she was, wore a garment of delicate pink—something soft, and warm, and fine—I had nearly pronounced it flannel, but that is a material suggestive of elderly rheumatic females, not of blooming damsels of eighteen. And a pink flannel rosebud! Pah! I would rather compare her to one of those dainty pink French sweetmeats—crisp, sugary, tempting—but sometimes with a bitter almond at the core. Like Rosamond's, the dress was closely gathered round the ivory throat and fairy waist, but the sleeves were wider, and fell back from the dimpled elbow and polished arm. It was shorter, too, giving to view two little bare feet reposing

on a velvet footstool. Such delicious little rosy feet! And the sunny face laughed out from the golden spray of silken curls, as they glinted and glittered in the fire-light, with every wanton, playful movement of the pretty restless head. I could have fallen down before Rosamond to worship her, and have gobbled little Monica up!

That is what I saw. This is what I heard.

• “But you like Dr. Guy, Rosamond?”

“Certainly—Dr. Guy, whom everybody loves, and everybody laughs at.” (She meant, laughs *with*, not *at*.) “Of course I like him.”

(After that, never tell me that “listeners hear no good of themselves.”)

“But would you marry him, Rosa?”

“Monica!” and Miss Gilroyd emphasized the exclamation with the brush on her rich hair.

“But would you, Rosamond?”

•



And the questioner bent forward to peer into the face which the tresses shadowed like a veil. I wished *I* could have done so.

"Monica, my love, there is a nursery maxim, which says, 'It's manners to wait till you're asked.'"

"But Lady Janet thinks you *will* be asked—that Dr. Guy admires you immensely, and wants a mistress for Rosebank; will you say 'yes,' when he asks you?"

"I will tell you, when he does."

"I am sure you will not, you sly thing! unless you accept him—so that is equivalent to saying that you will accept him! Ha! ha! ha!"

And Miss Graysbrooke broke out into her musical, merry laugh, so full of mischievous archness, that I, only prevented myself from joining it by an effort which resulted in a queer, choking noise, like a frog with a catarrh.

Rosamond started, and looked round—

(what glorious black eyes that girl has).

"Good gracious! Monica,—there's that man; you have awoke him—"

"No matter, dear, he is stone-deaf, I tell you—you shall see."

And the little wretch ran to the door, and drummed upon it, crying—

"Mr. Selwyn, can you hear us, Mr. Selwyn?"

Certainly I was not going to answer to another man's name.

But Rosa was satisfied.

"There, child, that will do; you will awake some one else in the house. Push down that shield."

Down came the merciless screen, and the lovely vision vanished. Just as well it did, perhaps, my eye was getting chilled by the current.

Then Rosamond proceeded to carry the war into the enemy's quarter.

"Mona, would *you* like to marry a doctor!"

"How can you ask such a stupid question—are you jealous of Dr. Crofton?"

"You know I am not."

"You *might* be," she said, petulantly.  
"I could whistle your Dr. Guy from you, any day, if I chose!"

(How had she found *that* out, the little witch?)

"I daresay you could, Monica, whistle anyone away from *me*."

And poor Rosamond sighed so plaintively I should have liked to reassure her.

"Well—you may keep him—I don't want him!"

(Saucy little hussy!—Miss Gilroyd is a far finer girl, and has ten times more *heart*.)

"Will you rather choose his Assistant, Monica?"

And Rosamond laughed in her turn, but not blithely as her companion had done; it

was a low, sad laugh, with something of bitterness in it.

Monica blazed out wrathfully—

“If you are not jealous of Dr. Crofton, Rosa, then you are of Mr. Wentworth, because you know he admires *me* !”

“No, Monica, I should never be jealous of Mr. Wentworth’s admiration, and—I have no *right* to be jealous of his love.”

“Had you *never* a right, my dear ?”

“No, I never had.”

“Now, Rosamond !—tell the truth—was he not your lover once ? when you lived in Somersetshire ? I am sure he was—though you are so cold to one another, now.”

“He was, or rather *would* have been my lover, if—”

“Ah ! then you refused him ? I suppose he was *not* good enough for you in those days.”

“He was a great deal too good for me,”

answered Miss Gilroyd warmly, "then, and always."

"You could not have thought so then, my dear," said Monica slyly, "or you would not have refused him."

"I will tell you that story," said Rosamond, "if you will promise never to speak on the subject to me again."

Miss Graysbrooke readily gave the required promise, and I (fie upon me!) drew closer to the door and glued my ear to the key-hole. Then Rosamond began—

"Once upon a time——"

"I don't like that unreal way of beginning, it is like a nursery tale."

"I will tell it my own way, or not at all."

"Go on, you cross thing."

"Once upon a time, there lived a young girl—what shall we call her, Monica?"

"Call her Mysie—that will stand for 'myself,' you know."

"Mysie was an orphan, brought up from

childhood by a bachelor uncle, her sole relative, who was reputed to be enormously rich, and whose heiress she was. When I tell you that she was considered handsome, you will be prepared to hear that she had many lovers."

"It is not always the handsomest girls who have the most lovers," remarked Monica sententiously, "only think of the hideous married women one sees."

"Moreover," continued Miss Gilroyd, "Mysie was tolerably accomplished, so that she had more temptation to pride and self-confidence than most girls of her age. When she was nineteen her uncle took her from school, and bought a beautiful estate in the country, where he placed her at the head of his establishment, and there she reigned like a young queen among courtiers and flatterers, whose praise might have turned older and wiser heads than hers. Unhappily for her, her uncle was too much absorbed in the anxiety of his business to

exercise any restraint or supervision over her, and she was lively, high-spirited, fond of power, impatient of reproof—”

“Oh, never mind that; come to the love story!”

“The owner of the estate adjoining her uncle’s, had a younger brother who was frequently thrown into Mysie’s society, and—”

“Ah! I know, ‘among the rest, young Edwin loved’—and did she care for him?”

“She cared for power more at *that* time than for affection; but he was as haughty as herself. He would never bow to the heiress—although,” and here her voice softened, “I think he would have bent to the *woman*. But Mysie wanted to subdue him, and she lost him instead.”

“Then she was very stupid!” cried Miss Graysbrooke, “*I* would have subdued him, and *not* have lost him!”

But of this vain-glorious boast, Miss Gilroyd deigned no notice. She went on—

"He was in London, pursuing his studies, she knew well that he was only waiting to complete these—waiting till his professional career was open to him, to say what many had said to her before, but which none had said so—"

"Acceptably," suggested Monica, but Miss Gilroyd rejected the interpolation.

"So sincerely!"

"That's a lame and impotent conclusion, Rosamond."

"Is it? when you have lived a little longer, my child, you will set a truer value on that word *sincerely*, which you think so hackneyed now."

"Well, go on! while he was in London, what happened?"

"Mysie made the acquaintance of a Colonel Densley and his wife—showy expensive people, who encouraged her in all sorts of extravagant follies, and to which she gave way, more from girlish frolic and high spirits, than from any real taste for them.



If Roland—if the gentleman we were speaking of—had looked on quietly instead of expressing so vehement a disapproval of these companions of hers, she would soon have tired of them herself. But when he attacked she felt bound to defend them, and her pride taking fire at his remonstrances, she showed her resentment by following the Densleys' lead, with a perverse audacity that cost her, I fear, many friends, when the great need arose of friendship."

"Why, did she do anything very wrong?"

"Nothing wrong—but the world is more tolerant of crimes than of follies—she only did what many 'fast' young ladies do, unblamed, while they are rich and prosperous. But Roland objected to the amusements of 'fast' young ladies, and more especially to the society into which those amusements bring them. On the day—on the very day he returned to Somersetshire,

having taken his degree with honour—he came to see the lady. She was in the shrubbery; and at the same moment arrived a servant bearing a dog, as a present from Colonel Densley; a note came with it, which she showed him in a kind of playful bravado—a note written familiarly, and in the worst possible taste—Roland was disgusted, he represented that the characters of both Colonel and Mrs. Densley were such as to make them unfit associates for any young girl; and he urged—almost *commanded* her—to refuse the gift, and break off the acquaintance.”

“And she would not?”

“No, her pride was wounded by his authoritative manner—she retorted with bitter, imperious words—when quite suddenly he changed his tone and—and—”

Here Rosamond faltered and stopped.

“Well?” asked Monica impatiently, “go on; what more?”

“Nothing more—nothing ever any more

for *her*. He offered her the truest, noblest, heart that ever woman won, and in her resentful, passionate madness—she refused it !”

“But, if she cared for him, she could easily have made him ask again,” said Monica.

“Such men do not ask twice—he left her, and returned to London—it was years before they met again.”

Monica was silent for some moments, musing, then she said—

“But if he loved you once he may love you still ?”

“Be satisfied, Monica,” returned her friend, “if he loved me once, he *hates* me now !”

“But why should he hate you, Rosamond ?”

“Because my poor uncle ruined Roland Wentworth and his brother, and killed, (they tell me,) his only and beloved sister. Wentworth of Wallingrove is exiled with

his wife and children to seek his fortune in New Zealand ; his sister died of the shock, and Roland, with his brother's position and influence lost, but with all his own energy, industry, and ability, is a mere parish doctor—the Assistant to a Guy Crofton !”

(She need not have spoken with such scorn of that position, either !)

“But,” objected Monica, “it was not *your* fault—he ought not to hate you for that ?”

“He cannot forget—he cannot forgive, my arrogance in the days of my false prosperity, when I was flaunting the wealth stolen from others—from *him* and *his* !—though, had I known it, Monica, I would rather have begged my bread than have profited, however indirectly, by such a hideous wrong.”

“It was no fault of yours,” repeated Miss Graysbrooke ; “you suffered, perhaps, more than he did. It would not be generous in Mr. Wentworth to *hate* you, Rosa-

mond ; but if it is really all over between you and him, you will not be annoyed with me, will you, if I laugh and talk with him, —I mean nothing, of course, you know,—only if it would vex you, or make you jealous—?”

“Jealous ? Monica, I should not presume ! The courted, flattered beauty is gone for ever—the humble dependent, a degree above a servant-girl, must beware how *she* betrays by word or look, that she remembers what Mr. Wentworth chooses to forget. She must learn to keep her place. Dr. Crofton’s Assistant is at great pains to teach her *that*.”

“Then,” resumed Miss Graysbrooke, with a little hesitation, “you *might* marry Dr. Crofton, if he asks you ?”

“There are times when I could almost marry any worthy man who asked me, Monica.”—(That was certainly encouraging, if not very flattering.)—“But if I did, I should despise myself, and pity him. There

—let us drop the subject, dear ; we have talked enough for to-night.”

But Monica was strangely persistent.

“Rosamond, *do* say if Dr. Crofton——”

The rejoinder came in a smothered voice :

“Hush, Monica, I am going to say my prayers.”

And although I hope and believe that Miss Gilroyd did not fall asleep over this exercise, I, who was no sharer in it, certainly did. And when I rose early in the morning to return to my own home, the silence in the next chamber was a certain proof that both the young ladies still slumbered.

## CHAPTER IX.

### AN ACTRESS—"CON AMORE."

THE dinner-party at Heath Hill, that day, was to include, besides the guests staying in the house, all the intending performers, either in the play, or the "tableaux," except, of course, some few, not of the *élite*, who were "cast" for subordinate parts.

Roland, therefore, was invited to dine, but poor I was forced to content myself with permission to attend a little earlier than the rest of the outsiders. They dined earlier than usual, to give them time for their subsequent preparations. Some audacious being proposed that they should save their time, by meeting at the dinner-

table in their characteristic costumes ; but the proposal emanated from a mere walking gentleman, whose dress would have no opportunity of display among the more brilliant attractions of the stage, and the others, especially the ladies, indignantly rejected an arrangement which would have robbed their splendour of its newest gloss.

And so, when I arrived there, I found the company dispersed—some to dress themselves, some to refresh their memories with a final reading of their parts ; a few were roaming about in a desultory manner, watching the finishing touches being put to the scenic arrangements of the little theatre. Among these last was the old Major, but *his* movements were by no means desultory. He was most active and energetic in his superintendence of the officials, some of whom, I am sure, wished him at Jericho, and would have got on much better without him.

Sir Charles Cotgrave, with his usual easy good nature, had resigned the manage-



ment of everything to the fussy old gentleman, and was amusing himself, during the temporary disappearance of the ladies, with a game of billiards with Augustus Danvers, who was too hopelessly stupid to be entrusted with any business on the stage.

I was just going to join them, when Miss Barham came in.

"Oh, Dr. Guy," she cried, "I saw you coming up the avenue, and I hastened to seize upon you. Do go to Lady Janet, please; she is alone in her dressing-room, and I want you to take charge of her, and amuse her, for Monica has taken Rosamond away, and even little Charlie has deserted her, and she is a little fretful this evening, poor thing!"

"Where is old Lady Comberhill, Annie?"

"With her daughter, of course. Aurelia is arming for conquest, as—guess who?"

"I can't say—as Hippolyta, perhaps, or Lola Montes, or somebody who is dressed in boy's clothes?"

"Oh, Guy! *you* to be so ill-natured!—No, she will presently appear as—Joan of Arc!"

"Oh, I see! that explains Sir Charles as Grand Inquisitor—I suppose he is to burn her?"

"How absurd you are!—as if the Inquisition existed in Joan of Arc's time!"

"Didn't it? I'm sure I didn't know. History is not much in my line. But Sir Charles's dress is that of a Grand Inquisitor, is it not?"

"Yes, but that is for the second tableau. Do you know, Guy, I think they made a bad choice of amusements in choosing to represent these tableaux, since poor Lady Janet cannot see them. It would have been different with recitations of any kind."

"But her taste has been consulted in the principal piece; she need not, unless she likes, take any part in the others—indeed, I would advise her not to fatigue herself by sitting up so long."

"Oh, do, Dr. Crofton! I am sure she will be glad to plead your authority as an excuse for retiring early, though she is too proud to give way without it. You have no idea how peevish she is to-night. She misses Rosamond; it is rather selfish of Mona to deprive her of the girl for so long; but she will be contented if you will keep beside her and amuse her—you are such an old favourite of hers."

"Aye? I was afraid that more recent favourites had displaced me—she seems to have taken such a fancy to Roland."

"So she has; but you need not be jealous—she makes even her approval of Mr. Wentworth an occasion for commending *you*. She said only yesterday, that you had shown so much judgment and discretion in choosing for your partner a gentleman who could be welcomed into the circle of your private friends."

"Did she say so? Well, I hope I have some judgment, Annie—though, bless my

soul ! I am not showing it by gossiping here with you, when her 'Ladyship wants me."

Poor old lady ! she was already dressed, sitting by the fire in her boudoir, and she turned her wistful, darkened eyes to the door as I went in.

"Dr. Crofton's quick step !" she said ; "aye, see how my sense of hearing is sharpened, Doctor. I don't know that I need envy Lady Comberhill her eyes and her ear-trumpet ! Sit down by me, Doctor—and Annie, you may go to those girls ; I know they all want you at the same time. Dr. Crofton shall take me downstairs presently."

I sat down beside her. Poor soul, she could not see my smile, as I guessed to what this condescension was to be the prelude. I was a little nervous, too—she was such a terrible old dame for going straight ahead to the point, and keeping to it. As the door closed on Miss Barham's retreating form, she turned to me eagerly—

"Have you thought over what I said to you the other day, Doctor—have you made your decision?"

"My dear Lady—really, on such a subject, abruptness in deciding—"

She broke in fretfully—

"Stuff and nonsense! there is surely no abruptness in deciding on a subject which you have had a month to think over—a month? you have been thinking of marrying these ten years, to my knowledge—and, rumour says, for ten years before I knew you. The girls you thought of have become the wives of prompter men—their daughters have grown up, while your hair is turning grey, and your teeth are falling out; and soon no girl will look at you—except for your money."

"Now, Lady Janet," I expostulated, a little offended at her uncivil allusion to my diminishing attractions, "allow me to assure you that my hair is not *very* grey, and my teeth are *nearly* as good as ever;

and as for a girl being tempted by my money—”

“I did not say that, Dr. Crofton,” interposed the old lady, hastily. “I said, if you delay much longer, a girl might only be tempted by your money; but, of course, you are sufficiently conversant with the world’s ways to be aware that your newly-acquired wealth—long may you enjoy it!—*does* give you an advantage over younger men who might otherwise start on equal terms with you. At least, it gives you an advantage with the *friends* of the young ladies you admire. For instance, in advising you to propose to Miss Gilroyd, your fortune—which might be a matter of indifference to *her*—has, and ought to have, great weight with *me*.”

“Certainly, madam—oh, yes!—or you might have made the same suggestion to—my Assistant? who is nearer Miss Gilroyd’s age, if that matters.”

“But it does not matter,” answered my

companion, sharply. "Your Assistant? why he can scarcely keep himself, and, I told you before, the girl cannot endure him—I do not need eyes to discover *that*."

"Ah! but if he tried, he might overcome her coldness, might he not?"

"Possibly; but they are unsuited to each other. Mr. Wentworth is a fine young man; but he is severe—even harsh—and very proud; Rosamond is as haughty as he is—they are too much alike ever to become lovers. Love, Dr. Guy, looks for contrast—two gloves for the right hand make no pair. No, believe me, *you* are suited for Rosamond's husband, and *she* is suited for you; and, if you will be advised by me, you will ask her, this very night."

But to such prompt action I demurred. Propose to-night?—and the Hartopps still at Rosebank—and the surrender of my practice still in abeyance—the final settlements of the lawyers yet uncompleted—and—and—such softness in Monica's blue

eyes!—such lingering tenderness yet in Annie's voice and smile! By Jove! I wish I could put myself up to be raffled for by these charming women, and be spared the invidious necessity of a choice!

"Well?" asked Lady Janet, impatient at my silence, "do you mean to have her, or not? will you go on shilly-shallying, until some one else steps forward and wins her from you? any man in your class might be proud of such an elegant and accomplished wife!"

I was not at all inclined to deny this, and yet the more pressing Lady Janet became, the more unwilling was I to pledge myself to the course she so strenuously advocated. I had an uneasy suspicion that she was not solely actuated by a desire for my welfare, or even for Rosamond's, but that her keen ears had detected her son-in-law's attentions in that quarter, and—but this was a very shadowy suspicion—that she was not altogether pleased with pretty



Monica's sweetness to me—and she thought in one move to checkmate them both. However, I was spared the necessity of giving her an answer, by the entrance of the Baronet, who came to take her into the drawing-room to receive her assembled guests, whither I followed them, and was now mingling with a troop of old friends, and sometime patients.

A country doctor of twenty-five years standing, is like a father—pooh!—a brother—in any social gathering for miles round him, though most of these guests were not even acquaintance of mine—being friends of Sir Charles or Lady Janet, from some distance. Very grand people, among whom an individual of “my class,” as that aristocratic old person would say, could not expect to be much at his ease. But I was not altogether without acquaintance in these select circles. Even the bluest blood is as liable as plebeian puddle, to be tainted by fever—noble heads will ache—noble

viscera will suffer derangement, and when a Queen's physician is not at hand to prescribe royal remedies, the country doctor is called in, and there is nothing like a sick chamber for abolishing, temporarily, at least, the privileges of rank and fortune.

*More* than equality I could never attain to, even in such circumstances, but Wentworth, with his calm air of authority, his dignified grace of self-assertion, was ruler and potentate in a sick-room, and as much in a duke's as in a pauper's. Still I held my own among the ladies—my female patients did not desert me. There was pretty Miss Robinson, of the Grange, who was ill with erysipelas in her head—she refused to see Roland, when he went in my place. I know Mrs. Hartopp *did* say that it was because she did not like Wentworth to see her such a fright—while she did not care about *me*, but that was just one of the she-curates's spiteful speeches.

However, I am forgetting our theatricals all this time.

Everything went off most successfully ; The arrangements were faultless, the decorations in good taste, "just like a *real* Theatre," as somebody said ; the scenery, which is sometimes a difficulty in amateur performances, presented none in this case, as it required no change ; the dresses were splendid, and if the gestures of the wearers were sometimes constrained, why, you know there is a stiffness in the costume of that time—if some bawled too loud, and others muttered too low, if one addressed himself too pointedly to the spectators, and another to nobody in particular off or on the stage, if the prompter was a little too audible to the *monde* before the curtain, and if the curtain itself stuck a little somewhere in descending, leaving a fringe of human legs plainly discernible beneath it—all these are unavoidable accidents in the pursuit of (amateur) dramatic excellence, and in no

degree checked the general applause, or chilled the general admiration. For really, after all, the main characters in the piece were well acted. I overheard the criticism between Annie Barham and a distinguished London *dilettante*.

I had been intensely curious to know how my frigid young friend would acquit himself as the lover in the play. He made a magnificent "Valence." He had had, in former days, some skill and practice in these kind of entertainments, and the part suited him. His voice, deep, rich, and clear, delivered every word of his speeches with the distinctness and emphasis of a practised elocutionist, and his dress, more simple as the lawyer of Cleves than that of the plumed and bejewelled courtiers around him, became the manly grace and dignity of his form.

He looked remarkably well, no doubt of that, and my glance strayed furtively from him in search of Rosamond, who was seated

at a little distance from me, full in front of the stage. "Furtively," I say, but had I stared ever so rudely at her she would have been as heedless as a marble image of my gaze. *Her* eyes never stirred from the performers—her figure was as motionless as if carved in stone—only the slight quivering of her parted lips, the flush that alternately deepened and faded on her cheek betrayed the emotion with which she listened to the lofty thoughts of the Poet, in the music of *his* voice whom she once loved. For that she *had* once loved Roland Wentworth, I was now fully convinced, however she may have since been estranged from him; so intense and absorbing an interest is never seen in a woman's look and attitude, in a poem she knows by heart, recited by a man who is, and has always been, perfectly indifferent to her.

Yet she might have divided her rapt attention with her pupil Monica, for really that girl was a credit to any teacher. I

heard Mr. Grantham say to Annie that "she was a finished actress." That she was lovely, graceful, well-dressed, is saying little—it was matter of course that she should be all these—but where the d—— (I beg pardon) where in the world or under the world did she learn that delicate blending of womanly tenderness and dawning passion, with the dignified reserve and maiden modesty of a high-born lady? If Rosamond taught her *that*, she proved herself a very efficient teacher, for, bless me! Monica could not have acted more to the life, if she had been in love with Roland herself!

And Roland acted well, too; he was evidently carried away by his poetic feeling, or perhaps he caught inspiration from the actress. I know *I* should! But then the character of Valence was not foreign to his own. I thought at first, and I heard others near me make the same remark, that he was a little too cold, but he warmed—he warmed

completely, he would have been a very iceberg if he had *not* warmed to such a Colombe!

She was a saucy little puss, too! Lady Janet had stipulated that there should be "no kissing"—nor, indeed, is there any in the poem—but at the end, when she turned, with that musical laugh, with that gesture of entire self-surrender, and flung herself into Valence's arms—upon Valence's breast!—if *I* had played Valence I am sure Lady Janet's interdict would—Well, well, down came the curtain, and the two were not alone behind it! In the general movement that followed the fall of the curtain, I lost sight of Rosamond, and not seeing her in the room when I looked round for her later, I supposed she had joined Miss Graysbrooke in the "green-room," or was helping to arrange the groups for the coming "tableaux."

These tableaux were as successful in their way as the drama had been. Aurelia

Comberhill in coat of mail, as Joan of Arc, was greatly admired — though, if “la Pucelle” looked half as ferocious, no wonder her enemies ran away from her! and a classical scene in which Charlie figured as the God of Love, with more drapery about him than Cupid wears in his native climate, was applauded to the echo. Lady Janet sat through it all. Though she could not see her darling, she could hear the praises of his spirit and beauty, and she smiled with pleasure as her ears drank in the music in which there must have been for her so sad an undertone of regret. But when the crowd broke up and surged towards the supper-room, where actors and spectators mingled, she turned her head towards me—

“Dr. Crofton, is Miss Gilroyd with you? I do not hear her voice.”

“She has left the room, Lady Janet. I thought she was with Miss Graysbrooke, but I do not see her.”



"I am tired, Dr. Crofton, I wish to go to my room, my maid is in the cloak-room, will you send her to me, if you cannot find Miss Gilroyd?"

I departed to execute this commission. The cloak-room was deserted. No maid visible. There were two lamps burning low on the tables. The fire had gone out. I looked in, and was turning away, when a faint, smothered sob caught my ear—a sob that came from what I had taken for a pile of shawls in a corner of the room. I paused, peering into the shadow, then I advanced softly.

"Miss Gilroyd!"—for she it was—sunk in a corner of the couch, her head bowed on her folded arms, her frame trembling with suppressed sobs, her whole attitude that of dejection and self-abandonment. Her face being buried in the sofa cushions, she had not heard my footsteps, and in the general rush of the household to the scene of the representation, she had doubtless imagined

herself secure from all intrusion. I went up to her, and bending over her, lightly touched her shoulder ; then she started round—her brilliant eyes flashed almost defiantly on me through their tears—but meeting my look of tender sympathy, her head dropped back to its former position, and she burst into a passion of hysterical weeping. I stood by her in silence, until the first violence of her emotion had spent itself, then went to the table, filled a glass with water from a decanter that stood there, and dropped into it an anti-spasmodic that I always carry about with me when I go into female society ; there is never any knowing when a woman may choose to go off in this way. To give her this I had to bend over her, to hold the glass to her lips, to pass my arm round her to support her, she trembled and quivered so ; then, setting down the glass, without relinquishing my hold of her, I seated myself beside her, and drew her gently towards me. What else

could I do? She was beautiful, and I was a man—she was suffering, and I was a doctor! Then, caresses are so soothing to women, when they are pure—and I swear my tenderness for an innocent girl is always pure—more, it is *reverent*—as an honest man's should be.

She continued to sob, but with less violence; she was exhausted; her head lay on my arm; by a very cautious movement I transferred it to my shoulder, where she suffered it to rest, unconscious of the caress, or dimly soothed by it. If she had been Monica no precaution would have been necessary. My embrace would have been received as a quite natural expression of sympathy — received and, perhaps, returned. I held her as cautiously, as lightly, as a child would hold a wounded bird—and she was wounded, poor birdie! there was more than mere nervous prostration in those sobs—there was the passionate utterance of wounded pride or wounded

affection ; by such a girl I know not which hurt would be felt most deeply. Any way I, a professed healer, had a duty to perform in trying to ease her pain. A prospective suitor, too, I had almost a *right* to console her ! She drew a deep breath, the tempest was subsiding, I might speak now.

“ Why is my birdie moping here, when she should be warbling her sweetest and gayest with the rest ? ”

“ Oh, Dr. Guy ! ” she murmured, plaintively, almost apologetically, “ I am so tired ! ”

“ I know—I know—you have over-exerted, over-excited yourself. You are not strong, fair Rosamond ; the heat of the room, and our friends’ too expressive recitations have overcome you ; but it is only an April shower—we may look for the sunshine now.”

She sighed, but withdrew herself gently from my encircling arm, and sat upright, smoothing her ruffled braids with her white

hands. I took one of the fair, slender hands in mine, and she suffered me to retain it.

"Dear Dr. Guy, how kind you are to me! how good of you to leave all the gay crowd of your friends to seek me out in my forlorn solitude."

"And why 'forlorn,' Rosamond?"—(I dropped the "Miss Gilroyd" for ever henceforth)—"and why solitary? Why are not you in your place in the crowd, enjoying your triumph?"

"*My* triumph?" she repeated.

"Yours, certainly; all Monica's success is owing to your patient instruction—you taught her the *soul* of her part."

"She has been a very intelligent pupil, Dr. Crofton; she is an actress by nature."

"So far as a mimic might be; she can readily catch and reflect the superficial lights of tone and manner, but she never would have caught by intuition the spirit

of the poet's creation, as she has learnt it from *you*."

"Still, the triumph is *hers*, not mine; she has so many triumphs, let her take this too—valueless to her, who—" then suddenly checking herself, she broke forth—" Good heavens! am I envying Monica the brilliancy of a position above my own? Am I fallen so low as *that*?"

"You have nothing to envy Monica, Rosamond; a woman like you, young, lovely, accomplished, can choose her own position. More beautiful, more gifted, than Miss Graysbrooke, why need you envy *her*?"

It was a mean treachery on my part thus to flatter one woman at the expense of another—but then, in my capacity of doctor, I was bound to try everything for my patient's relief. But Rosamond rejected the flattery—

"If I had nothing else to envy Monica, Dr. Crofton, I should still envy her her

power of winning hearts. All love her ; if she were a servant-maid, and I her lady, she would still be more beloved than I."

"Not so, Rosamond ; if you *cared* to win hearts, as Monica does—" (baser yet, Guy Crofton !) "but you are too proud ; or, among those who admire her most, there is at least *one* heart that you could conquer from her, if you deigned to prize it."

The force of baseness could no further go ! but righteous retribution was at hand. My beautiful companion turned away her face—the movement was unnecessary, for there was not light enough for me to see it—and murmured, more to herself than to me—

"Too late ! too late ! he *might* be fickle—he *could* not be untrue."

By George !—she was thinking not of me, but of my Assistant ! Bother the fellow ! After such a "fluke" as that I may as well give up the game—at least, for to-night, thinks I, and I was about to offer

to lead her back to the saloon, when steps were heard approaching our retreat.

"Hush!" I whispered, "keep quiet—they are not coming in," and I drew closer to my partner in hiding, pressing her arm to enforce silence, and holding my breath in suspense.

The steps drew nearer, and I distinguished the tuneless accents of my enemy, Mrs. Gabriel Hartopp, who flung wide the door, behind which I and the young lady were sitting, like ring-doves in a sequestered glade.

"Quite dark!" she shrieks, "the lamps are out, and the fire too! but never mind, Gaby darling! I know where I left it. I can lay my hand on it."

And in she came, her arms stretched out before her, to feel for her cloak, or whatever else she wanted, and "laid her hand," with a resounding pat, on what she certainly had not "left" there—*i. e.*, the baldest place—the only bald place, in fact—of the



crown of my head ! Followed a yell—a yell of surprise from the discoverer—which I could have echoed from sheer disgust. The alarmed husband caught up a lamp that stood on the hall table, and flashed its light on the group behind the door. Grand tableau ! there was Rosamond, crouched into the furthest corner of the sofa—there was your humble servant, close nestled beside her, both blinking their eyes, as the sudden flame flared on them, like two children of darkness cowering from the light ; and there stood Mrs. Gabriel Hartopp before them, her arms still outstretched, as if in denunciation, while the parson held the lamp on high, like orthodox truth illuminating superstitious error. Illumining, I say—not dispelling—for even as Heresy will sometimes hold its ground in spite of the preacher’s *vade retram*, so did Rosamond and I retain our seats in the face of parson and parsoness ; but I am sure that I, for one, would have vanished speedily if

I had not been barred from escape by Mrs. Hartopp before the door. It was lucky for me that the Rev. Gabriel, and not his wife, was the genie of the lamp—*she*, I know, would have held it over me, while she gloated on my confusion ; but a man can feel for another man's delicate embarrassment as no woman—no woman of Mrs. Hartopp's stamp, at least—ever feels for another. So, with just a slight smile, he turned away, and placed the lamp on a stand at the other end of the room, while Miss Gilroyd arose from her corner, as calm and self-possessed as if she had been waiting there to receive Mrs. Gabriel, who broke forth in unholy exultation—

“Well, I'm sure, Dr. Crofton ! so it's *here* we find you !—and Lady Janet has been inquiring for you this half-hour !”

“I am here at her Ladyship's request, Mrs. Hartopp. I came in search of Miss Gilroyd.”

“Oh, indeed ! and you were waiting for

the light, I suppose, to make sure that you had found her?"

"Come, Nelly, my dear," interposed her lord, good-naturedly, "here is your cloak—and since we have all found what we were looking for, we may as well bid each other good-night."

"But, Gaby dear, did you ever hear of such an old flirt as the Doctor? Why, it is positively shameful! I have a good mind to tell Miss Barham."

"And why, Miss Barham?" asked Rosamond with a smile. "*I* will tell her, Mrs. Hartopp, if it will save you any trouble—did you say Lady Janet was enquiring for me?"

"Yes!—this hour ago."

Rosamond glanced serenely at her watch.

"Quite incorrect, I assure you. An hour ago, I was at her ladyship's side."

"Well, I heard her tell Mr. Wentworth to go and find you, but he made some excuse, and walked off in just the

opposite direction. He is too busy philiandering with that little coquette of a 'Column,' as she calls herself—I think *both* our medical men are horrid flirts—it is quite time that we should have *married* doctors at Cleobury."

"I am quite of your opinion, Mrs. Harropp; but I must not stay to discuss the point, as Lady Janet wants me."

"Allow me, Miss Gilroyd—" and offering my arm to the "young person," as Mrs. Gabriel called her, I left the happy pair to return to the conjugal roof, with a nice little tit-bit of scandal to take home with them—a dainty which the lady highly relished, and which she could cook as skillfully as the celebrated artiste, who could serve up fifteen *entrées*, from a couple of horse-shoes. About as wholesome and nourishing a diet, too.

## CHAPTER X.

### OVER HEAD AND EARS.

"HALLO ! Dr. Crofton ! what's up now ?" enquired Roland, as I made my appearance one morning arrayed in a fire-new hunting-dress, of the newest fashion too, and looking, I flatter myself, uncommonly well in it. "So you are taking your seat, are you, among the hunting squirearchy of our county ?—upon my word ! this is too smart a rig-out for a Cleobury tailor, I guess ?"

"I believe you, my boy !—this came from London, every stitch of it—Cleobury tailor, indeed ! How does it fit, Roland ?"

"Like a glove !" he answered, taking me

by the shoulder, and twirling me round with an admiration that was scarcely as respectful as it might have been; "but who is it donned for, Doctor?—for little Miss Graysbrooke?—or big Miss Comberhill?—or—but no—Miss Barham does not hunt. However, you won't tarnish your pink much to-day, for the bay horse had a long day's work yesterday, and he won't carry you far."

"I ride the roan mare to-day."

"You will do nothing of the kind," rejoined my Assistant, very coolly; "I have to go to Adlington, and I want the roan for that journey."

"Nonsense, Wentworth, the old woman at Adlington can do without you till to-morrow. You take the bay, and come with me to the meet. You can go later, and visit the patients nearer home."

Roland hesitated a moment, and an indefinable expression crossed his face. I thought he was going to yield, and was

quite amazed at such an unusual result of my persuasions ; but he said—

“I don’t care if I do go to the meet with you to-day, because it is at Brakefield Coppice, which is on my road to Adlington, but I shall not let you have the roan, so you must do the best you can. Perhaps Sir Charles will mount you ?”

“Not likely, when he has friends staying with him, who depend on his stud for their day’s sport. I don’t mind—the mare is just no good—you have knocked her to pieces. I will take the bay this morning, and next year I will keep a hunter for myself, at Rosebank.”

“Which must be warranted to carry a lady !” laughed Roland, “or you will have to keep *two*, Dr. Crofton.”

I vouchsafed no answer. I was rather sulky at the young man’s refusal to give me up my own horse. I had set my heart on the roan, because she was the showiest horse I had, and I wanted to show off a

little to-day. Roland's gaiety was short-lived—he made no attempt to renew the conversation, and we rode almost in silence to the hunting-field.

It was a very full field, and they were all assembled, when we rode up. Miss Gilroyd was there, on Sir Charles's "Freya." She was dressed "*point device*" in feminine riding-gear, and looked splendid.

She sat her spirited horse with the ease and grace of an accomplished horsewoman, and all the masculine eyes of the throng followed her with undisguised admiration and approval.

A little withdrawn from the group which had gathered round Rosamond, as if she were Queen of the Hunt, was Monica Graysbrooke, who, in an evil hour for herself, and in spite of her father's remonstrances, had insisted on being of the party. She was at no time a skilful rider, and had never ridden anything but her quiet old Welsh pony, and she sat Sir Charles's



spirited Arabian "Saladin," in such evident discomfort of mind and body, that Saladin himself was at no pains to hide his contempt. The gentlemen present were all keen sportsmen, and even the attractions of the heiress failed to draw any of them to her bridle-rein, in the too evident probability of being kept there when horses and hounds should long have vanished into space.

As Wentworth and I rode up, I noticed the bright carmine flush into Rosamond's cheek, and the flash in her dark eyes—but she only bent her head coldly in return to Roland's salutation, while she busied herself with the buttons of her gauntlet, and smiled sweetly on me.

"What," said Roland to me, in a low voice, "what could possess Sir Charles to put Miss Graysbrooke on that Arabian? she will come to grief, to a certainty—she has no idea of managing him."

He rode to Monica's side as he spoke,

and Miss Gilroyd's glance followed him furtively.

Monica looked up appealingly into his face.

"Oh, Mr. Wentworth, are you coming? *do* ride with me! I am so nervous—Sir Charles cannot keep near me, and I am afraid of riding with any one who goes fast—will you stay by me?"

"I do not hunt, to-day," answered Wentworth, "but here is Dr. Crofton, come on purpose to take care of you—excuse me, Miss Graysbrooke, you are fretting your horse with that curb; allow me—" and bending over her, he touched her hand lightly, as he adjusted the bridle, while Rosamond, still furtively glancing towards him, let fall her glove, and two eager cavaliers instantly sprang forward to restore it to her.

"*Do* come!" reiterated Miss Graysbrooke, "do for once—I shall feel safe with you!" and she looked into his eyes so imploringly,

he must have had a heart of stone to resist her—and still Rosamond watched him furtively.

At that moment Sir Charles approached Miss Gilroyd, and said something to her that I did not catch, but as she turned her head to reply, Wentworth in his turn glanced at *her*, and saw, as everybody else must have seen, the heightened colour and flashing eyes.

As he looked, he forgot to answer poor Monica's entreaty, and then Sir Charles came up to his *quasi-fiancée*, and I went off to Rosamond's side. Wentworth hesitated a moment, and then followed.

She looked at him, and spoke to me. "Is Saul also among the prophets?—I was not aware that Dr. Guy ever hunted!"

"Oh, yes, I have always hunted occasionally, and henceforth I hope to do so oftener—it is a very healthy amusement, Miss Gilroyd."

"Mr. Wentworth is not of your opinion,

he does not approve of ladies riding to hounds, although," glancing towards Monica, "he seems to have qualified his censure, as far as regards Miss Graysbrooke."

"I do not remember," answered Roland, "that I ever expressed disapproval of a lady's amusing herself in any way that the gentlemen of her family sanction by their presence and companionship."

"Ah, exactly, it is only the poor 'unprotected female,' whom you would debar from her share in such recreations?"

He did not answer, and thinking my presence embarrassed him, I drew aside a little, and dismounting, employed myself in tightening the girths of my saddle, but my ears were open for all that, and from under the saddle-flaps I watched Rosamond's eyes.

She addressed him again in a lowered voice—

"Time and experience have not made me more tractable to good advice, Mr. Wentworth, you see."

"I am sorry that it should be so," he answered, "sorry for your sake, if it is so, but I have not, I think, presumed to offer you advice."

"Oh, no, I quite acquit you of showing any such interest in my well-being," she said, bitterly; then suddenly softening, "and yet, indocile as you have found me, I would ride back to the house this moment—I would never appear in a hunting-field again, if I had *one* friend who cared enough for me to say, 'Do so, Rosamond, for *my* sake.'"

She seemed to pause for his reply, and then resumed, sadly—

"But I have no such friend, not one, not one who retains even a memory of old—friendship—What should *I* care what men say or think of me? Young as I am, I have outlived all the brief friendships or my summer days!"

"If your friends have failed you," he answered, in a grave, deep tone, in which

was more of suppressed feeling than his cold words betrayed, "the more need that you should be true to yourself, that your womanly dignity and self-respect should not fail you."

She reined her horse round so sharply that he reared, and called out to Monica and Sir Charles—

"Sir Charles, I'll bet you a pair of gloves that Freya is first with the hounds all day?"

"Done," said the Baronet, "you are not in sufficiently good practice, Miss Gilroyd, to make that likely—you will tire, though Freya won't."

Roland took off his hat to the two girls, and rode hastily away.

"Crofton," said Sir Charles, "will you take charge of Miss Graysbrooke? she is a little nervous to-day."

"Shall I take you home, Monica?" I asked, "if you are nervous, you will not enjoy yourself."

Monica glanced at Cotgrave, who was gazing admiringly at—Freya, and bit her pretty lips.

“I won’t go back, Dr. Crofton, if you will take care of me, I shall feel quite safe with you.”

“Sir Charles,” I called to him, “are you sure that Saladin is to be trusted with a timid rider?”

All were now in brisk motion, Rosamond and Aurelia Comberhill a little in advance, Sir Charles beside them. He looked back laughing.

“Quite to be trusted—as trustworthy as yourself, Doctor; and he’ll take you over anything, Monica.”

Off we started—poor Monica not appearing particularly comforted by the Baronet’s last assurance. But when the fox went away, and the whole field after him, Saladin chafed and fretted to follow, and Monica grew terrified. I had to calm her by riding close beside him, with my hand on

her rein. I forgot Miss Gilroyd, or rather, I *postponed* her. As Saladin's restlessness subsided, Miss Graysbrooke gathered confidence. Her spirits rose with the sense of security, and she sparkled and dimpled with all her usual vivacity, and even ventured on a gallop over the breezy downs, across which Reynard was leading his pursuers. I had to check her, for Saladin was again getting excited. My over-worked horse could never have kept up with him, and then what would have become of Monica? Besides, I did not wish to lose an opportunity so seldom afforded me, of basking in the little maiden's smiles.

I was surely not to blame in trying to soften to her the neglect of her lover, for though he might not have been able to keep by *her* side, there was no necessity for him to keep so persistently at Rosamond's. And so I cantered easily along beside my sweet charge, and as I bent down towards her, my voice grew soft—



my words were tender—"Oh, there's nothing on earth like making love, save making hay in fine weather!"

Soon the cry of the huntsman died away on the distant hills. Rosamond's white feather, and Aurelia's scarlet skirt gleamed, flashed, and vanished in the coppice that crested the hill. Monica was alone with me. She looked wistfully after the retreating hunt, and pouted, just a little.

"I think," she said, "I am tired, Dr. Guy. I will go home—it is very kind of you to sacrifice yourself to such a stupid little thing as I am—I wish I could ride like Rosamond. Do you think I could, if I had more practice?"

Of course I protested that she had given me one of the happiest hours of my life—"And why should you wish to ride like Miss Gilroyd, Monica?—to us men there is nothing so charming as the soft feminine timidity, which is your most attractive grace."

"Yet," was Monica's rather irrelevant reply, "Mr. Wentworth and Sir Charles were glad enough to hand over the charge of me to *you*, Dr. Guy!"

"Oh, as for Sir Charles, he, you know—Hallo! where have we got to?—this is a regular *cul-de-sac*—there is no gate here it seems—we must turn back, Monica."

We had come through a long bridle-road, which led into an enclosure, which we traversed, and found no outlet at the further end, but a high gate, which was securely locked. I dismounted, to try to open it, while Monica rode round the hedge, seeking for a convenient gap. I was about to rejoin her, when Saladin, mistaking some impulse of the rein, or disgusted at having had no occasion to display his peculiar gifts, began suddenly to dance and caper.

Just then, afar off, sounded the blast of the horn, and Saladin rose into the air, and instantaneously fulfilled his master's promise, by carrying his fair rider "over" the

hedge, and—leaving her there! while he scoured riderless across the fields. Horrified, I rushed to the hedge, and looked eagerly over it, and I am ashamed to say, I could not refrain from a burst of unfeeling laughter at the sight I there beheld.

On the other side of the hedge was a large horse-pond, belonging to a farm-yard at a little distance—a large, wide, but not very deep horsepool, glazed all over with a cake of green duck-weed, that made it resemble a lawn. In the midst was a great “snag,” as our country-people call the roots of trees, which are in great request about us, for our young ladies’ ferneries. On this snag, half sitting, half reclining, leant my hapless Monica, looking as if she had risen, like a Naiad from the *not* translucent stream, (as indeed she had), or like Sabrina sitting

“By the rushy fringed bank,

Where grow the willow and the osier dank.”

That the bottom of the pool was formed

of red clay, and that she had recently explored it, was evident by her face being all patched and streaked, like an Indian's in his war-paint. Her hat had fallen off—her fair curls distilled muddy drops on her shoulders, and were tangled with water-weeds, and sprinkled with green “*ranunculacea*,” like a fowl served up with parsley sauce, while the clinging and trailing skirt of her habit suggested the popular notion of a mermaid.

To see this funny little figure in the middle of the pond, convulsively grasping the horns of the “snag,” her eyes wild with terror at her novel position, like a half-drowned kitten's, sobbing and gasping from the effect of her sudden immersion, was enough to make Charon laugh ! I contrived, however, to stifle my unseemly mirth, before she had recovered herself sufficiently to perceive it, and having forced my way through the hedge, I was presently standing on the edge of the waters that rolled

between me and my fair (and damp) one. How to get her out was the question. The water, deepest where she stood, was not more than up to her knees; it would scarcely have been over my top-boots; but I had of late been suffering from a twinge of rheumatism in my knee, (this in inviolable confidence, reader,) and, had I ventured the risk of increasing it, by a cold foot-bath, the bottom of the pond was evidently so slippery that I felt certain that if I attempted to cross it, I should inevitably pitch into it, over head and ears, and then, who would pull *me* out?

There was the horse, but my horse was not used to carry double, and if I asked him to bring the lady ashore, he would certainly decline the proposal; so I just stood still at the edge of the pond, and said, as calmly as if nothing could be expected of me:

“My dear Monica, come out directly!

don't sit there, catching your death of cold."

"Sit there?" she echoed resentfully, "do you suppose I sit here to enjoy myself? It is a wonder I have not been drowned! Here, do come and take hold of my hand and help me out."

"My sweet girl, I cannot let go the horse. I will hold out my whip to you—come, it is only a step—think that you are on the sands of Scarborough, my love, and come, don't be frightened."

But Monica declined this little effort of imagination.

"I won't stir," she protested, "unless you come to me. I dare not, it is deep here; I am sure there is a dangerous hole somewhere."

"No, no, my child, it is quite safe, come along."

"It is all very well to say 'come along,'" said Miss Graysbrooke, seating herself determinedly on her 'snag,' "but you are

very cruel and selfish. I am catching my death ; you are all as selfish as you can be, going off and leaving me here."

"But, Monica," I remonstrated, fishing out with the hook of my whip a dead cat that was floating near me, "it was Saladin, and not I, who left you there, and you need not stop there unless you choose. Come out, that's a dear girl."

"I have lost my hat," she moaned, "I have ruined my habit ; there's such a nasty smell ; and, oh, dear ! there's a cold crocodile creeping up my leg !"

And in a terror, regardless of zoological probabilities, she jumped up with a splash, and commenced wading to the shore. Just as she reached it her foot slipped (on the dead cat, I believe), and she fell prone upon my breast. I never could have thought it could have been a matter of regret to me that a pretty girl should throw herself into my arms ; but, oh, my new hunting dress ! and Monica *was* so green and slimy ! How-

ever, I made the best of it, and happily, at that moment, one of the farm labourers appeared, leading the captured Saladin.

"Now, Monica, mount instantly, and let us hasten home, before you get thoroughly chilled."

"*I am* thoroughly chilled," answered the angry beauty, "Sir Charles ought to be ashamed of himself for making me ride such a beast. I believe he would not have cared if I had broken my neck. I am not going to get on him again, I can tell you."

At this fresh insubordination I was in despair; but on my solemn promise to keep hold of her bridle all the way, she at last consented to remount. I treated her as the laundress treats my linen—I wrung her out and put her on the horse to dry—then I picked up her hat, which one of farmer Stilman's pigs was trying on, and then we proceeded homewards, at a slow pace, and just as we got upon the bridge which spans the river near Cleobury, who



should we meet but that odious Mrs. Hartopp.

"Why, good gracious!" she screamed, "whatever have you two been about?" and she stopped short in the middle of the narrow bridge, so that we could not pass without riding over her. "Have you been trying to commit suicide in the gutter, Miss Graysbrooke? Oh, dear, how bad you do smell!"

"Make way, Mrs. Gabriel, please, Miss Graysbrooke has been thrown, and I am anxious to get her home as quickly as possible."

"So I should say, from the pace you are going at. Why are *you* taking care of the young lady, Doctor? I think Sir Charles is the proper person to do *that*."

"And I think," retorted Monica, with spirit, "that you need not keep me in my wet clothes, while you give your opinion on affairs that do not concern you. Please let us pass, Mrs. Hartopp."

"Oh, to be sure, my dear Miss Graysbrooke—it is no affair of mine, certainly, where Dr. Crofton picked you up. I think it must have been in a drain. Well, I should never have expected to see the belle of Cleobury in such a pickle! and look at the breast of the Doctor's coat, why you must have been lying on it!"

Here I made an equestrian demonstration that compelled our tormentor to step aside, and Monica, poor little thing, began to cry. When I left her in her dismayed father's charge, after dictating the necessary precautions to be taken to guard her from the danger of cold, my last vision of her was a piteous face, all dabbled with clay and slime, down which the tears had drawn long lines of variegation, which gave her more resemblance to a belle of the Cannibal Islands than a belle of civilised Cleobury; and so ended poor Monica's hunting.

## CHAPTER XI.

### ROLAND'S RELATIONS.

It was in the natural order of events that Miss Graysbrooke should be confined to her room with a cold on her chest after her plunge bath in the open air; but it was unnatural disorder that she should refuse to allow me to attend her, and persist in having Mr. Wentworth only for her medical adviser. It was not my fault that she tumbled into the pond—it was not even my horse that threw her in. But girls are so inconsequent! However, Roland assured me that notwithstanding the old Major's fuss and fidget, there was really very little the matter with his daughter;

so I waited quietly until she should come to herself, morally as well as physically. She only wanted to excite interest and sympathy, and to punish me for not having sacrificed myself—and my garments—to fish her out. I am not sure that I did not feel slightly flattered that my neglect should have piqued her so. Before she chose to leave her room, I was summoned to town on the settlement of my chancery suit, to receive the first fruits of the long-deferred harvest of success. Joyful mission! I should return to Cleobury with such a credit at my banker's as I could never have hoped to win by a long life's medical practice in our very healthy county. I would return, to spend my time in embellishing Rosebank for its future mistress, and that mistress I will give it, please Hymen, before the year—my fifty-second year—is out! Roland shall have my practice—he shall rule with undivided authority over all the sick beds in Cleobury parish, and the

accursed tinkle of the night-bell shall sound for him alone. In the fulness of my elation, I promised him that, before I returned home, I would run down to Northwych and see his sister. Poor fellow, it was a fancy he had—though neither he nor I were sanguine as to the benefit of the visit to her. On the morning I left home, my Assistant hovered round me with an air of hesitation and indecision very unusual with him, as if he was anxious to say something which he felt a difficulty in bringing out. My carpet-bag was in my hand, my over-coat on my arm, before he summoned courage to say—

“ Dr. Crofton, I need not remind you that, in my sister’s state of nervous excitability, the greatest caution is necessary in avoiding all allusion—” and here he stopped short.

“ Never fear, Roland, I will be cautious in avoiding any subject that can excite her ; but I shall be safer from the danger of any

imprudent allusion if I knew to what in particular you refer."

He answered, with an uneasy laugh—

"Tell her as little as you can of my present position—my professional prospects—or, in short, Dr. Crofton, keep her from drawing any unfavourable comparison between my present and my past fortunes. My poor Marian does not know the full extent of the ruin that has fallen on her—tell her nothing of me that could enlighten her on this point."

"Ah, I understand; women are easily blinded in matters of business. I'll be careful—she shall learn nothing from me."

"And," he continued, blushing like a girl, "may I ask you not to mention Miss Gilroyd's name before Marian? I have not thought it necessary to tell her she is here—you will oblige me by maintaining the same reserve."

"All right, my boy, I will be discreet—though why you should care—"

But before I could finish the sentence, Mr. Wentworth unceremoniously vanished.

I was detained in London longer than I had expected, but I bore the delay with equanimity. My patients, I knew, were well cared for in my absence—they could do without *me*, and, praised be Plutus!—*I* could henceforth do without *them*. I looked up some old friends in town, and in their society I amused myself extremely well for a fortnight, when my lawyer announced the grand finale, which left me—Guy Crofton—the *bonâ fide* possessor of a clear two thousand a year!—safe to me, and to my heirs for ever. Aye—my *heirs*! I can go back now to Cleobury, settle at Rosebank, install there the queen of my affections—when I have decided who shall wear that crown—and found a family. But, ah me!—those rigorous marriage-laws of England! Oh, that my inheritance had been in the Valley of the Salt Lake! where no narrow restrictions would have

limited my choice—while Rosamond's dark eyes flash, and Monica's blue eyes smile, and gentle Annie's glance beams meek reproach of my oblivion of "Auld Lang Syne." Yet, Annie, darling, the reproach is hardly deserved—I have *not* forgotten the "long ago"—only—only it is so *very* long ago! Nowhere under heaven, Annie, could a man find a sweeter companion, a truer friend for his declining years—but my years have not begun to decline yet. I am, unfortunately, young for my age—even for my age—and why should I throw away my advantages?

While a young girl like Monica, or Rosamond, smiles so sweetly on me, why should I turn my eyes from that sunny smile to rivet them on that confounded baptismal register of mine? True, Monica is *very* young, and it would not be fair to Sir Charles to take advantage of the dear child's innocent partiality; it is my duty to stand firm and resist the enchantress.



And there's Rosamond—poor, dear Rosamond—Lady Janet was quite right in saying, that no where could I find a lovelier, a more graceful lady, to rule over my little domain—and I don't think she was far wrong either, in saying that it would not be very difficult to persuade her to wear the crown—I really do not think I owe Roland any forbearance in that quarter. He had his chance and lost it, and, stupid fellow, he does not seem to care much about the loss. In the first joy of meeting the friend—the lover—of old times, doubtless Rosamond *did* repent her former rejection of him, but then *he* has rejected her advances, and a spirited girl like that is not likely to sue long for reconciliation. To be sure she does not love me—not as yet—but she does not shrink from me, she has confessed to *liking* me ; from liking to love it is not far to lead a woman, if a man knows how to set about it, and Guy Crofton, my lad, you are not altogether a neophyte.

And thus, while the train whirled me on—my dreams of wedded love went on—unbroken by rattle, whistle, or jar, and still rose Miss Rosamond's queenly form above all the rest, until I almost resolved that she—she alone—should be "the Insect Queen" towards whose capture, henceforth all my pursuit should be directed.

Annie should be, as ever, my esteemed and valued friend ; Monica—

Now the train stopped at Northwych, and my dream was dispelled for the moment by the vulgar necessity of looking after my carpet-bag.

I had not been able so to regulate my movements, as to give Mr. Hollys notice of the day I intended to come, though he knew from Roland that he might expect me some time in the week. So I went to a hotel and dispatched a note to his address, enquiring if it would be convenient to him and Mrs. Hollys to receive my visit in the evening. I was still sitting over my wine,

when Mr. Hollys was ushered into the room.

From Roland's allusion to his sister's love-match, when a beauty and "a fortune," with the young clergyman without money or influence, I had expected to see in Mr. Hollys a very striking and attractive specimen of the clerical variety of the *genus homo*, but I saw nothing of the kind. I consider it a remarkable proof of the insubordination of imagination to experience, that people will go on looking for results which they rarely or ever meet, in the caprices of lovers' choice, wondering whenever they see a wayward fancy or an unaccountable taste, as if these were not the rule, rather than the exception, in marriage. I ought to have been sure that if Marian Wentworth had chosen from among a throng of admirers, of whom many might have been rich, handsome, or talented, the man she did choose would be "nothing particular."

Mr. Hollys was a man of about thirty, with pale hair, and paler eyes, and with that air of depression about him which often settles down like a permanent shadow, upon men who have passed their life's spring-time without any chance of professional success or advancement. Such men are, as it were, planted on the *north side* of the world, and soon grow hopeless of its sunshine. He greeted me, however, with a cordiality which proved that my Assistant had given a good report of me to his relatives, and informed me that his wife had been apprised of my arrival, and was eagerly expecting me.

"Not as a physician, Dr. Crofton, she believes that your visit to Northwych has reference to your own affairs only—for the kindness which has prompted you to take this long journey to see her, you must receive her gratitude on trust, from me—but as her brother's friend and partner, she is most anxious to welcome you."

“Partner!” thought I, “that is rather premature on Mrs. Hollys’ part,” but I made no observation, which was fortunate, for Mr. Hollys proceeded to explain.

“Of course I am aware that Roland’s relations with you are on a less equal footing, but Marian is ignorant of this—and I have not the heart to undeceive her—it is the whole study of her friends to spare her a moment’s pain.”

“You are quite right, Mr. Hollys; from what Wentworth has told me of his sister’s state, I fear all we can do for her is to alleviate the suffering we cannot cure. She has been some time in this condition, I believe?”

“Yes, it is now nearly three years—the year Gilroyd and Westerman’s bank failed. You know we lost her whole fortune by that failure?”

“I have heard so, and that her elder brother was also ruined; but it was well that Roland saved something from the wreck.”

"Do you know how much he saved, Dr. Crofton?" asked the clergyman eagerly.

"Not I, indeed," answered I, surprised at the enquiry, "what can I know of his private affairs? he is never very communicative, and after all, our acquaintance is but of a few months' date."

My new friend coloured slightly, as if convicted of an indiscretion, but after a moment's silence, he resumed the conversation upon a different subject, and I presently rose to accompany him to his own house, marvelling inwardly at the reticence of my Assistant, which not even his nearest relatives seemed privileged to break through. Mr. Hollys appeared to know little enough about him, and from the warning Roland had given me at parting, he seemed destined to receive no enlightenment from me.

Knowing, as I did, that Mr. Hollys had nothing on which to support a sick wife and three children, except a curate's pittance of a hundred a-year, I was prepared

to find that even with the assistance I was well aware he received from his brother-in-law, he was scarcely able to keep the wolf from the door, or keep off the pressure of pinching poverty from the suffering mistress of the house. I was therefore not a little amazed, when, after a twenty minutes' walk, we stopped at the gate of a pretty cottage in a suburb of the town, a cheerful, bright-looking dwelling, of which the gas-lights illumined a neatly kept garden and shrubbery.

No signs of poverty there, certainly—but many people contrive to keep up an air of gentility *outside*, for which, poor things, they pay by the economies and privations of the interior.

A dainty little parlour-maid opened the door, and Mr. Hollys led me into an elegant drawing-room, furnished with simplicity, but in perfect taste. There was no sign of restricted expenditure here, everything was bright and fresh ; from the rich carpet, the

well-chosen engravings, to the pretty *jardiniere* and vases filled with greenhouse flowers.

A lady-like looking woman of middle age was seated at the table, with two pretty little girls, very nicely dressed, of about four and five years old, beside her. They ran to meet their father as he entered, and he presented to me, in due form, his young daughters, and their governess, Miss Maxwell, and leaving me to their attentions, he quitted the room to announce my arrival to Mrs. Hollys.

Almost, however, before the governess could utter a sentence, the dainty parlour-maid appeared at the door, and made the mysterious signs that servants seem to consider more courteous than an articulate summons, and with a brief apology to me, the lady vanished.

Left alone, I drew the youngest child on my knee, while the elder, after a shy glance into my face, jumped at once to the con-



clusion most children arrive at, after looking at me, that I should make a very agreeable playmate and crony, and forthwith took up a position behind my chair, and opened a friendly battery on me at once.

"Are you the Doctor who lives with Uncle Roland, please?"

"Your uncle Roland lives with me, my dear—what is your name?"

"My name is Mary, and *her* name—" pointing to the little one, "is Fanny; are you fond of Uncle Roland?"

"To be sure I am."

"So am I," said Fanny, "did he tell you to bring me a doll?"

"How selfish you are, Fan!" said Mary, in a tone of dignified reproof; "Doctor, have you come to cure poor mamma?"

"Nobody can cure mamma, except Uncle," asserted Fanny, authoritatively; "mamma doesn't scream much when Uncle Roland is here."

"Because that's a long time ago, and she

is worse now, you stupid goose," rejoined her sister, discourteously. "Doctor, Miss Maxwell is going away soon, and we are going to school, because mamma cannot bear Fanny's noise."

Thereupon, Miss Fanny, from her vantage post on my knee, aimed a kick at the elder lady, and put up her lip with an ominous threatening of indulging me with a specimen of the performance which Mary designated as her "noise."

Evidently the influence of the superior-looking governess could not supply the want of discipline, so general in a household where lingering sickness dwells.

A movement outside the door arrested Fanny's impending wail.

"Here comes mamma," cried Mary, and the door was flung wide open, to admit a long, low couch, on which the invalid was wheeled in by her husband, while Miss Maxwell followed, ready, when her patroness was arranged, to swoop upon the

little maids, and bear them off to their nursery.

I drew back into the recess of the bay window, while Mr. Hollys wheeled his wife to her accustomed place, and Miss Maxwell settled the shawls over her feet, and the pillows under her head, and led her pupils away ; and then, at a sign from the husband, I approached, and took the seat he placed for me beside the couch.

END OF VOL. II.





